

Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 5

Tsuredurebana

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5

- A Sign-on-the-Line
Wedding Story -

Author: *Tsurezurebana*
Illustrator: *Rin Hagiwara*

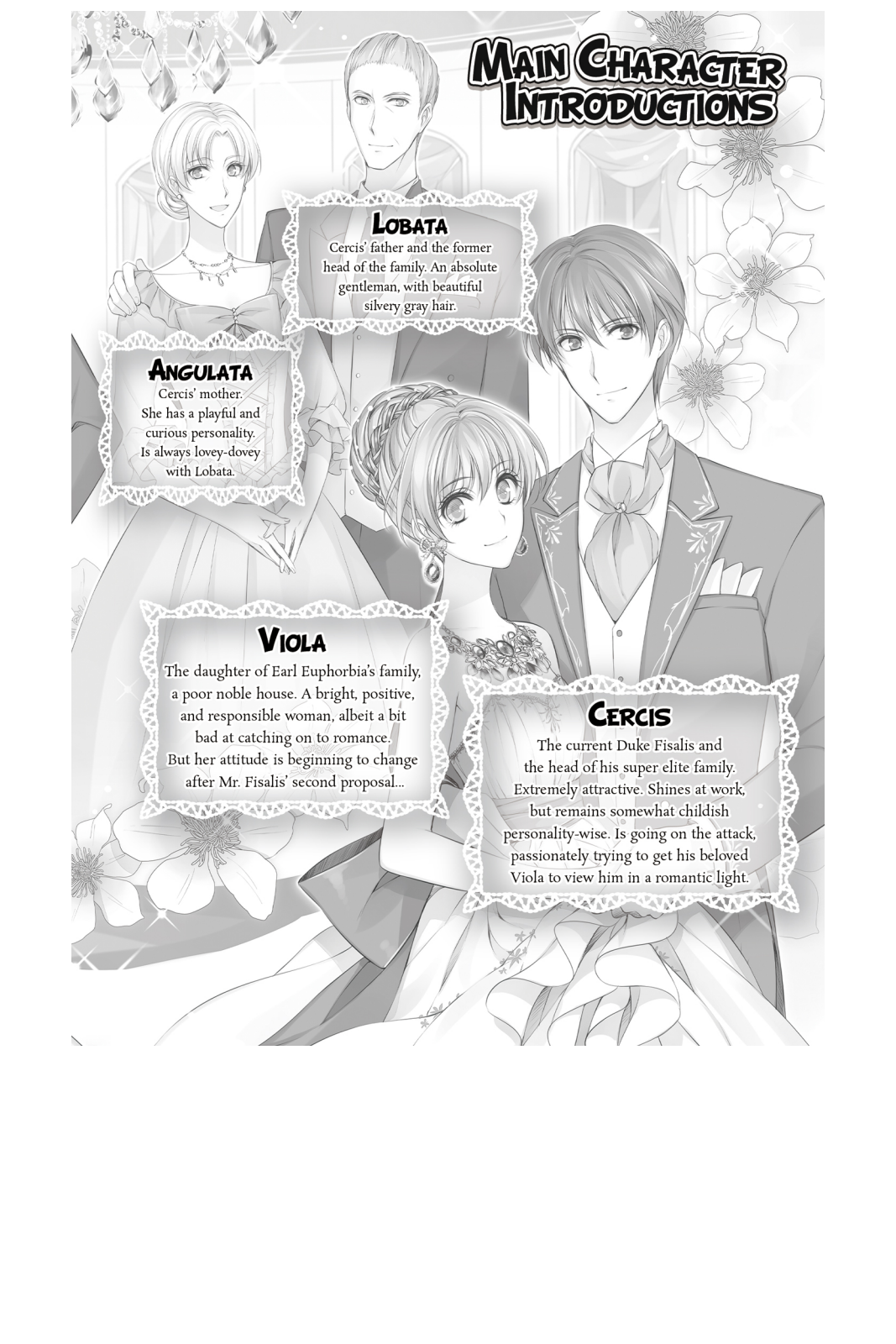


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MAIN CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

LOBATA

Cercis' father and the former head of the family. An absolute gentleman, with beautiful silvery gray hair.

ANGULATA

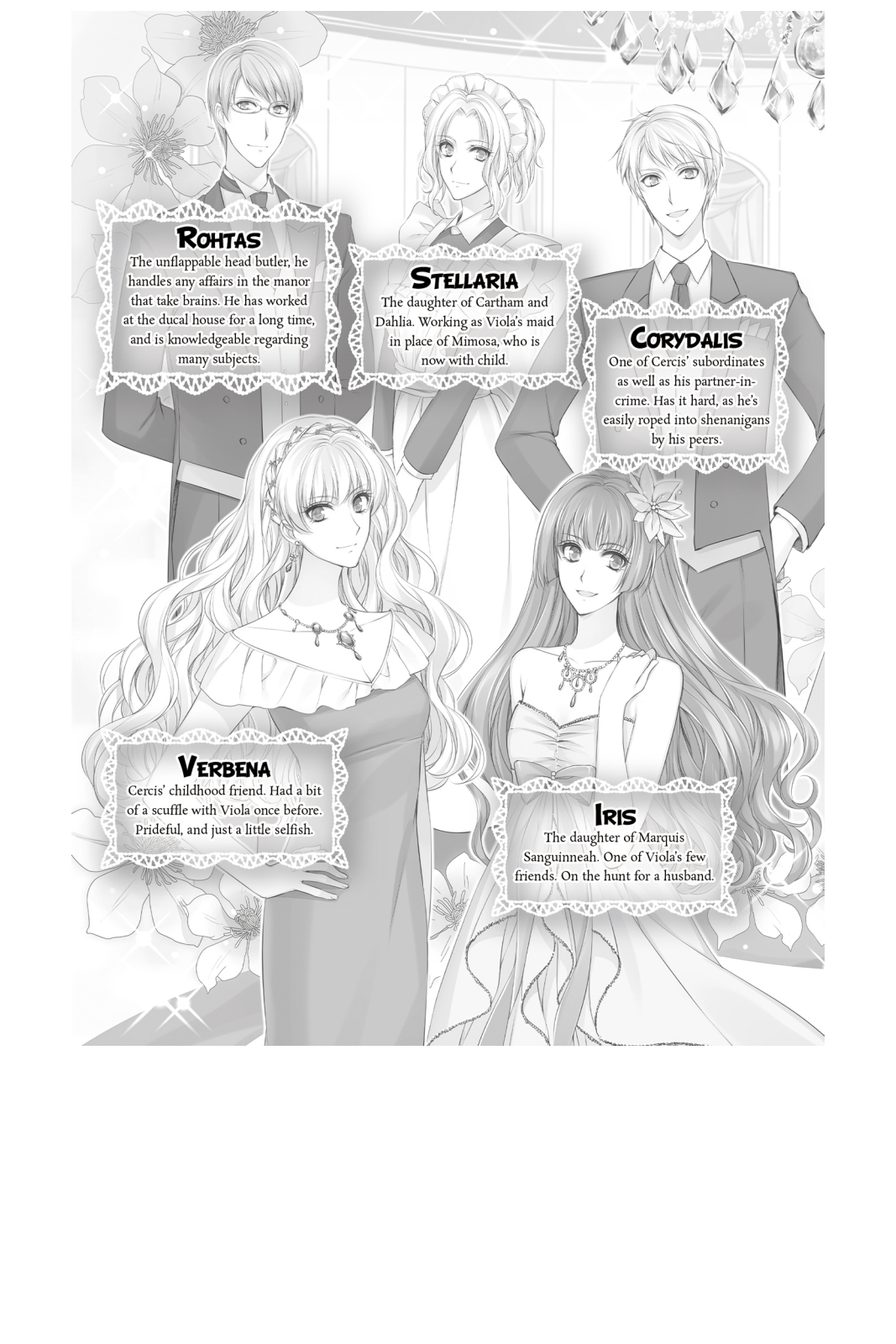
Cercis' mother. She has a playful and curious personality. Is always lovey-dovey with Lobata.

VIOLA

The daughter of Earl Euphorbia's family, a poor noble house. A bright, positive, and responsible woman, albeit a bit bad at catching on to romance. But her attitude is beginning to change after Mr. Fisalis' second proposal...

CERCIS

The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family. Extremely attractive. Shines at work, but remains somewhat childish personality-wise. Is going on the attack, passionately trying to get his beloved Viola to view him in a romantic light.



ROHTAS

The unflappable head butler, he handles any affairs in the manor that take brains. He has worked at the ducal house for a long time, and is knowledgeable regarding many subjects.

STELLARIA

The daughter of Cartham and Dahlia. Working as Viola's maid in place of Mimosa, who is now with child.

CORYDALIS

One of Cercis' subordinates as well as his partner-in-crime. Has it hard, as he's easily roped into shenanigans by his peers.

VERBENA

Cercis' childhood friend. Had a bit of a scuffle with Viola once before. Prideful, and just a little selfish.

IRIS

The daughter of Marquis Sanguinneah. One of Viola's few friends. On the hunt for a husband.

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Prologue

As we looked down over Le Pied, bathed in the glow of the sunset, Mr. Fisalis dropped one hell of a... Er, a *doozy* of a confession on me.

To break it down: he was sorry to all the servants for how he'd acted up until now. He was going to repent for what he'd done, and he was going to take his position as Duke seriously from now on and actually do his best.

And...

He promised to love me for his whole life.

I was totally unprepared for him to whip out a line like that here, so I'd gone straight into a shocked daze.

I mean yeah, he'd been pretty sweet to me since he broke up with his girlfriend, and sometimes he spouted things like "I want to become a real married couple" and "my precious wife" and nonsense like that. But he'd never said anything like that directly to me, so I hadn't thought much about any of it.

But then he went and threw me a total curveball. *I'm just a romance rookie, here! I can't handle rapid developments like this!*

While I stood there perplexed, he told me, "Your answer can wait until your feelings catch up."

Mr. Fisalis, actually caring about my feelings! Oh, how you've grown! ...Whoops, excuse that condescending tone. I mean, he's becoming nicer. Before, he wouldn't have thought about how I felt—he'd just have done his own thing. He really has changed.

"I like that about you," I let slip, much to my own shock.

Waaaah, what the heck am I saying!? I can feel my face heating up!

"Did you say something?"

"Nope, absolutely nothing."

Luckily for me, I'd whispered it quietly enough that my words were lost in the wind, so Mr. Fisalis hadn't heard me. The ruddy glow of the sunset masked my blush, too.

Anyway, no matter what sort of refreshing smile you shoot at me, I'm not gonna repeat myself!

All this after I'd managed to avoid feeling anything for him... Ah, jeez, I don't even understand myself right now.

"It's getting dark already. Let's get back to the villa before we catch a chill," Mr. Fisalis said, bringing me back to reality.

"Ah, okay!"

“I wonder what’s for dinner tonight? I’m starving after all that’s happened today.”

“Yeah, it’s been a busy day. Are you really alright, Mr. Fisalis? You sure you aren’t hurt?”

“I’m completely unharmed. Want to give me a full-body check-up?”

“Of course not! Geez...”

“Ahahaha!”

Where did the serious mood go?

After that, we walked back to the villa while chatting as if nothing had happened (while holding hands, of course!), the servants ushered us in like normal (where did their panic go!?), and after eating a lavish meal of local cuisine (authentic food just tastes different!), we had our usual pre-sleep dispute (it’s obligatory now!). Finally, our day had ended.

Hm? Isn’t this kinda... too soon? Once I settled down in my spot and pulled the blanket over me, I started wondering. I snuck a glance at Mr. Fisalis lying beside me, but he was already asleep—probably exhausted from the scuffle earlier. Maybe he’d made our night as short and normal as possible so I wouldn’t feel rushed?

Yeah, that sounds about right, actually... Looking at his beautiful sleeping face, it all started to make sense. It kinda made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside to think that Mr. Fisalis would worry about me like that.

Aaah, I’m beat. Thinking’s never really been my thing, so of course it’d wear me out. Zzz...

—

Not wanting to wake Viola after she was worn out by her run-in with those lowlifes the day before, I quietly got out of bed, dressed quickly, and headed to the living room downstairs by myself.

“Good morning, Master,” Rohtas greeted me.

“Ah, morning. Viola probably over-exerted herself yesterday, so please don’t wake her yet.”

“As you wish.”

Rohtas was already up and waiting, so I just gave him my instructions.

What’d happened yesterday really shocked me. That feeling I’d gotten was probably what people mean when they say their “blood ran cold.” Viola had nearly been kidnapped by hooligans!

Though our customary territory-tour-slash-honeymoon had been delayed until now instead of happening right after our wedding due to... er, *various circumstances*, I’d never thought something like *that* could possibly happen.

“I’d like you to begin getting Viola’s community watch idea

going.”

“Arrangements are already being made.”

Seriously, this soon!? I'm shocked at how fast he does things. Or, well, it's Rohtas, so of course he's already started.

While I was being impressed at his efficiency, Rohtas spoke up, slightly hesitantly.

“...I gathered from your discussion with the Captain that the public order in Le Pied has declined, but were there any specific incidents that prompted your actions?”

Oh, that's right. I hadn't told any of the servants, including Rohtas, what had happened in town the day before. I gave him a summary of the events. When he heard that Viola had almost been carried off by thugs, his face took on a slightly dangerous cast.

“I see. I will make sure that the Captain is advised to restore peace as soon as possible.”

“Thanks. But... Viola really does say some things that none of us could have possibly come up with, huh?”

“Yes, she does. Madam is very clever,” Rohtas said with a smile. All of our servants really do love Viola so much. If both she and I were hanging off the edge of a cliff, just one slip away from death, the servants would save her in a heartbeat... which is good! When she was abducted, it was like my vision just went dark.

In the beginning, my show wife could have been anyone. I'd come to hate the heavy responsibilities of the duchy and aristocratic life. Now that I think back on it, I was only resisting because I thought the status quo was too boring. I always wanted to just throw everything away and run. That was why I picked Viola as my show wife.

But then I saw how that same show wife began to live a carefree and fun life within that same restrictive world that had always made me feel trapped. She didn't actually *like* going out in public, but she did it. On top of that, she even helped to improve our reputation.

And what did I do for her in return? Nothing! But every time I spoke with her, saw her, felt touched by her vitality—every time, I realized I couldn't stay as I was.

And Calendula, the only woman who'd never cared about my face or my rank—whom I'd thought was the love of my life—was overshadowed by Viola's very existence.

Viola had probably lived happily out of the public eye her whole life, and I'd pulled her out into the aristocratic world through my own selfishness. The Fisalis name wasn't just for show. By marrying into one of the three most influential families in the kingdom, Viola had been thrust straight into the spotlight as a Duchess, whether she liked it or not. But seeing her properly act the part without complaint made me realize that I shouldn't have been running from my role as Duke.

I loved Viola, and knew that she was someone I needed to protect, but the incident the day before made it clear. My world would go dark without her.

And that's why I told her how I felt, with no lies.

...Although my wife is so dense that she didn't get it until I came straight out and said it! "I need to be more serious about protecting Viola," I said to myself, reaffirming my resolution.

"What are you on about, Master?" And of course, Rohtas was always ready to talk back.

"No matter how clever she is, Viola is still young—younger than me. She's probably struggling, being pushed into situations that she's never faced before. And sometimes, she pulls adorable little stunts."

She was praised by the aristocracy for her elegance, but had gotten so upset over breaking a single vase in the manor. That duality was so cute, though.

"Ah..." Rohtas must have realized what I was talking about, and smiled bitterly. But he didn't let me leave it at that, giving me a look that said, "And?"

I hesitated, but finally decided to tell him. "...I told Viola how I felt last night."

"It took you this long?"

"Don't say 'this long'! That's how long it took me to get this out!"

"That's wonderful. Madam is slow on that front, after all," he said with a smile.

"That's a good one... Anyway, that's what happened."

"I see. Do be more diligent from now on. Ah, please have a look through these reports on Le Pied's public order that we've just recently received. Also, these concern our agricultural income, while these are research reports on the mineral processing techniques from the mines—" Rohtas said, stacking a heap of paperwork in front of me.

Hey! Don't shove all this work at me with a smile like you were just waiting for the opportunity... Grr!

"..." I glared silently at the mountain range of documents.

"Weren't you going to do all you could for Madam's sake, Master? I will help, so do your best."

Smiiiiile.

I can never win against the power in that smile.

That's right, I've gotta do my best for Viola! I've completely turned over a new leaf!

...I just kind of regret announcing that in front of Rohtas.

1 — My Brand

“Let’s go to the duchy’s pride and joy today—the mines.”

I completely slept in for once, exhausted after all the fuss of the day before. After I ate breakfast, Mr. Fisalis cheerily announced that we were going to go take a tour of the mines.

“The mines? The ones with the rubies, right? We passed them on the way here.”

“Yep, we did. But I want to show you *how* our rubies are produced, and I also want to see how the mine and their gem processing techniques are going,” Mr. Fisalis explained, flipping through some paperwork.

He was talking about processing techniques and difficult stuff like that, but seeing where they actually dig the jewels out...! We didn’t have any glamorous resources like that back at home, so I was kinda excited!

“Okay! It’ll be my first time going to a mine. I’m looking forward to this!”

“Alright. We’ll leave as soon as we can, then.”

And so we quickly got ready and headed to the mines. Since today was going to mainly be observation, Rohtas came with us.

We hopped into the carriage and left Le Pied, heading to the mines which lay a bit closer to the capital.

Just as I’d thought when we passed them a few days ago, the mine was in a rocky mountain area, and the reddish-brown terrain plus the lack of any trees or grass made it look like a complete wasteland. I could make out holes here and there in the rock face. Were those holes where they mined the gems out?

“This is my first time seeing anything like this. There’s lots of holes in the mountains... What are they for?”

“Those are for accessing the actual mining sites deep underground. They dig so many because they’re always searching for the richest mineral veins. Since the mine itself is old, the shafts have become quite the underground maze. If anyone wandered inside, they might never find their way back out.”

While we watched, trolleys full of rocks and dirt trundled out to the workshops, and empty ones were sent back into the mines. Workers were constantly rushing in and out.

They’re working so hard to dig up wonderful jewels while we just stand

here!

“Oi! You’ve gotta focus—this is dangerous!”

“We’ve got lots comin’ out that hole today.”

“Send this trolley down that shaft—”

“Okay!”

I could hear the workers’ vigorous calls back and forth. Since they were laboring in what looked like a wasteland, they seemed that much more lively and powerful in contrast.

We watched as they washed and selected the rocks they brought out. People in white robes held the rocks to heat and looked at them through thick lenses, doing some sort of research that I didn’t understand. As we walked around the facility, Mr. Fisalis explained everything to me.

According to him, all of the workers here lived in a village close by that was built exclusively for them, and they came to work every day. They mined the ore carefully by hand, and anything they dug up was sent to Le Pied for processing.

By the way, I wasn’t allowed into the mine shafts themselves, since they were too dangerous. It was kind of boring, only getting to peek in from outside, but I didn’t want to get in any trouble, so I listened.

Sometimes, Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas would stop and begin to discuss things like ruby yields or the location of new shafts. Since I didn’t know much about that, I just let Mr. Fisalis lead me around by the hand.

Ooh, a pretty rock.

While the two of them were off in their own little world talking, I would look around. Suddenly, my gaze stopped on a startlingly blue stone. *How’d they get something this vividly blue out of this desolate red landscape?*

When I bent down to pick it up, Mr. Fisalis spoke up. “Oh, a trash sapphire.” Since we’d been holding hands, I must have tugged on his.

“Trash?”

“Yeah. This mine produces both rubies and sapphires, but they process the smaller sapphires into rubies and distribute them. Rubies are far more rare, after all. The artificial rubies are worth a lot less than natural ones, but there’s still demand for them. The rock you’re holding is a trash sapphire—one that couldn’t be processed,” he explained, having crouched down beside me.

What? Sapphires turning into rubies? Is that some kind of magic!?

While I looked around in shock, I saw lots of other blue stones lying on the ground. From the way they were being treated, they must have all been trash sapphires, too. What a waste!

“I can’t go into detail about how they’re processed into rubies,

because it's a duchy secret, but that's how it is. That was the purpose of the facility we just saw," Rohtas quickly added.

Had we? Ah, maybe he's talking about the place with all the workers in white robes. We must've rushed through since the process was so very hush-hush. I get it.

Wow~ I didn't know that... Sapphires really have potential, huh! But while I was shocked by that, my common sense kicked in.

"You don't really focus on the sapphires?" He'd mentioned that the sapphires were more common, so why didn't they?

When I asked him this question, he replied, "That's right. We have so many, so they're not rare. Our focus is on rubies..." He stared into my eyes.

I tilted my head, trying to figure out why he'd drifted into silence at the end of his sentence, only for him to continue—this time addressing Rohtas. "Hmm. How about we put some focus on the sapphires, Rohtas?"

"I see... If we distribute the ones we'd normally process into rubies as just sapphires instead, it will make sure the rubies stay rare. If all goes well, the sapphires may even cover for any unforeseen drops in ruby production."

Way to go, Rohtas. He didn't falter at the sudden question.

"Okay. How about the quality?"

"They've been sufficiently high quality up until now," Rohtas replied, leafing through the documents in his hands. Mr. Fisalis stood up, looking at them too.

"Then we *can* do it."

"Yes."

And so, they decided to put some effort into the sapphires, too. What a big change, just because I picked up a pretty rock! Oh no—is this really okay!? Ah, but Rohtas said it was, so... I guess it must be? Whatever—if it puts money in the duchy's coffers, it's good.

I'd been sitting there kinda flustered listening to their back and forth, only for Mr. Fisalis to pull me up. What? I looked up blankly, not knowing what he wanted to do, and he gave me a big smile.

"And..."

"And?" I said, confused.

"And..." Even Rohtas was confused.

"Viola's eyes are exactly the color of sapphires. Let's call our highest quality gems 'Viola Sapphires!'"

"Guh."



Wait, wait, are you serious, Mr. Fisalis!? I just made a weird sound, there!

“Guh?” Mr. Fisalis must have been really surprised, because he repeated what I’d said, giving me a puzzled look.

“No, wait, that’s kinda super embarrassing! Let’s think of a better name—don’t rush into this!”

I’m gonna tone it down as much as I can! Naming a jewel after your wife? I mean, if I was some kind of super bombshell, it’d be fine. It’d be cool to have something with my name that’d outlast me, in that case, but I’m so plain! There’s no reason for me to have my name on anything whatsoever. Ah, I can’t stand this!

“It’s not embarrassing at all! It’s just great branding!” Mr. Fisalis was all smiles, seemingly having no intention of changing it despite my protests. He was practically sparkling.

Oww. Stop! This is too painful.

Plus.

“That’s a wonderful name. It will definitely become popular.”

Grin.

Even Rohtas is agreeing with a smile, but he should be putting a stop to this! Why are you agreeing!? Ghhrhahh!! If they really do get popular in Rozhe as ‘Viola Sapphires,’ we’re totally going to get pitying looks. Ugh... Going out in public’ll get even more difficult... Maybe I should just give up on public life. Huh, wait, that’d be good! Wait, no, Viola!

“It’s INCREDIBLY embarrassing! I’m totally against this!” I did my best to resist, but...

“Let’s give Viola the revenue as well.”

“Understood. I’ll have preparations made to put everything under Madam’s name.”

“She’ll never need to worry about her spending money ever again that way.”

“Yes.”

Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas just kept going, ignoring me completely. *Why won’t anyone listen to me at times like this~! Someone, please, stop them...*

Once things were officially(?) underway for sapphire distribution, we left the mines and returned to Le Pied to see how they were processed.

I’d caught a glimpse of the jewelers’ street when we’d been here yesterday, but we’d only passed by. Apparently, rubies and large sapphires were processed at proper gem cutting shops. The excess stone and dirt were removed back at the mining facilities and the raw gems were then brought into town to be polished to their proper sparkle. That was the job for the jewelers in Le Pied—they did the

cutting.

Once the gems were finally cut, merchants would come from Rozhe and elsewhere to buy them and use them in the production of things like necklaces and hairpins. Then, finally, they'd be sold to the aristocracy.

That's it for today's High Society Field Trip report—with your host, Viola!

But nevermind that.

Once we finished observing the gem cutting workshops and were finally back outside, I noticed there was a simple little general store across the street.

“Oh, that place looks cute.”

“Hm? Ah, wanna go have a look?”

“Can I?”

“Go ahead.”

Now that I had Mr. Fisalis's permission, I popped into the shop and immediately saw that they were selling handmade hair ornaments and brooches. Each one had tiny stones set into geometric shapes or floral patterns. Every red and blue stone was bright, and they were all beautifully and carefully made. The stones themselves weren't just glued on, but were set with proper metal prongs, and angled so that the light hit them just perfectly.

Normally, it would be difficult to see the shine in stones that small, but the craftsmanship made it so they caught the sparkle from all the other gems around them, synergizing in deep hues.

This is some pretty high-quality craftsmanship, isn't it? But they aren't from some fancy artisan, but just a normal general shop. Anyway, I'm more shocked by the fact that I actually figured all that stuff out! Back at my family home, I only ever wore jewelery when I had to go to a party. And all of the jewelery had been ancient hand-me-downs from Grandmother and Mother. The gems were good quality, but the designs were, um... Aha☆

I'd been wearing high-quality gems more often since marrying into the Fisalis family, so I must've learned a bit. Shocking, I know.

But that aside...

“They're so pretty!”

“The simple look is nice.”

Every single item was different, and the diversity was so interesting.

After Mr. Fisalis and I made a lap around the little shop, I picked up a hair ornament that I liked.

“We make our accessories out of discarded rocks from the mine and jeweler's across the street,” the cheerful old lady at the counter told me.

So they use those trash stones!?! That's great! That's exactly what my 'waste not, want not' heart wanted to hear! And they're all so cute, I just can't handle it!

And on top of that, the lady told me that townspeople with nowhere to go collected the stones and made them, as a way of providing for themselves. They were quite popular, too, and they were being sold wholesale in nearby towns.

As the wife of the duke, of course I'd have to buy some after hearing all that!

It was time for me to shamelessly suck up to my husband. I picked up a hair ornament that I liked, and looked up into his wonderful dark-brown eyes...

"You want that, don't you? Any others you like? We could bring them back as souvenirs for everyone at the manor," he said with a smile.

It worked perfectly. Go, little devil Viola! After buying some for the maids back home too, I headed back to the carriage, pleased with myself.

But while I was walking, all smiles, I heard...

"When we get back to the villa, I'd like to work out the details for the sapphires."

"As you wish."

Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas were *still* talking about that. I'd forgotten all about the 'Viola Sapphires' being set in stone, so to speak.

...My retreat from public life is getting closer!

2 — To the Seaside Territory

Once we returned to the villa, Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas started to seriously debate the whole “Viola Sapphire” deal. *Seriously?* Even Fennel, the villa’s butler, joined in while they discussed the matter in the drawing room.

They’re actually serious about this. And I’ve learned from experience that no one can stop Mr. Fisalis when he’s on a roll. And with this, even Rohtas is all for it! There’s no way I’ll get them to stop.

“They’re crazy for thinking of putting *my* name on a gem,” I muttered, distributing the hair decorations and brooches we’d bought as souvenirs from the general store to the servants (only for the women, of course). I gave them out to Anise, the duchy’s former head maid—who was the head servant here at the villa, apparently— and the housemaids, plus Stellaria and Rosa. I couldn’t bear to listen to any more of the “Viola Sapphire” discussion, so I’d escaped to the dining room. I would’ve loved to retreat into the servant’s break room instead, but unfortunately, I didn’t know where it was. *I couldn’t get in, anyway.*

“The young madam’s eyes are this exact color, so it’s no surprise that he’d want to name them after you. Look, they’re beautiful,” Anise said, soothing me with a gentle smile as she held up a hair decoration studded with little sapphires. Even if they were trash gems, they were still beautiful and bright.

I mean, YEAH, they’re basically the same color as my eyes, but... “The sapphires definitely *are* beautiful, but none of them will sell if they’re named after me. Since they’re so nice, why not call them ‘The Queen’s Sapphire’ or something like that?” I suggested with a smug look, thinking I’d come up with the perfect solution.

“Her Majesty’s eyes aren’t sapphire-colored.”

“Ah... oh, yeah.”

Stellaria quickly shot that one down. *Her retorts are just as cool as her mother’s... Sniffle. I’ve never seen the Queen’s eyes up close, so I wouldn’t know.*

“And there isn’t a soul in the palace who doesn’t know your name now, Madam.”

She’d been a lady-in-waiting at the castle up until a bit ago, so she must be telling the truth. But why the heck would my name be famous!? “...Um, what are people saying about me?” I asked out of morbid

curiosity.

“They say you’re an ephemeral beauty, and a perfectly-mannered lady besides. You have a beautiful figure, and you’re so stylish that you can pull off any of Madame Fleur’s dresses easily. You’re also a proper lady on the inside, great at dancing and conversation too. And most importantly, you’ve captured the affection of Duke Fisalis himself! You’re said to be the belle of high society. And since you so rarely show your face, they call you the ‘Illusory Belle.’”

The words coming out of Stellaria’s mouth made me feel faint. *That’s got to be a completely different person! Oh my go—*

My vision went black, and I felt dizzy.

“Ah, Madam!” Stellaria rushed to catch me as I staggered with a shiver.

“Who are they talking about? Not me, right? Ah, you probably mean Miss Iris. Or maybe Miss Verbena?” Rubbing my temples, I finally managed to squeeze out the words, but...

“I’m talking about you, Madam!”

Straight out. She just said it straight out, again. That’s DEFINITELY not me. This must be what they mean by rumors running wild. Now that I think about it, Dahlia said she heard similar things circulating in high society... So it’s already gotten to the point where the ladies-in-waiting in the palace have heard about it. This is absolutely humiliating. “Illusory”!

“Oh, everyone will want gems named after someone so wonderful!” Anise was still smiling brightly, but I really wasn’t all *that* good!

“I’m not nearly as amazing as they say! Ah, geez, I can never be seen in high society or the palace again. It’s just too embarrassing. That’s it—I’m gonna retire right now and live my life in seclusion.”

And having a sapphire named after me on top of all that? Ahh, this is painful. If I’m “illusory,” then I’m gonna do as illusions do and vanish from sight!

“Oh, don’t say you’ll retire! There’s still lots to do in the world,” Stellaria chided me.

“And if you wear the sapphires, you’d be a walking advertisement for them, Madam. It will make them even more popular! Once we get back to Rozhe, let’s have some accessories made for you,” Rosa said, joining in. “Should we start with a necklace or earrings? Ah, but a ring would be wonderful as well. Ria, what do you think?”

“Let’s have all of them made! And a dress to match, of course.”

“You’re right! Maybe in blue, same as the sapphires?”

“No. White, so the blue accents really pop.”

“Oooh~, Ria, you’ve got such good taste!”

“Bright colors only suit young ladies.”

“Grannies like us can’t wear them well, after all.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’re both still young!”

“I wish we could see Madam dressed up so lovely.”

“Come to Rozhe sometime~!”

They launched into a rousing round of girl talk, forgetting all about me. Even Anise and the housemaids joined in, so everyone was in high spirits. *Looks fun. They’re not talking about themselves, after all. Rather than my retirement from high society, they’re gearing up for my next dress and accessories instead. They’ll probably call for Madame Fleur and the jeweler Pommier the moment I get back. What if they’re already waiting for me? I actually can see that happening, unfortunately.*

“Ahh, yeah. Uh, let’s all calm down a bit, okay...” Well, saying that calmed *me* down, at least.

“I want to go to one of our enclaves next,” Mr. Fisalis said the next morning as we ate breakfast.

“Enclave?” I’d heard that the Fisalis family held territory other than Le Pied, but I didn’t know where any of it was. I tilted my head, asking where he wanted to go.

“Yes. We have a few, actually, but I thought we could start with our territory by the sea.” He pointed to the spot on the map that Rohtas quickly laid out.

What. The sea!? So the family has a foothold somewhere that nice, huh? Amazing! The capital is far inland, so since I grew up near there, I’ve never been to the ocean. My family didn’t have the money for trips, after all☆ Could you really call going to our family territory once a month a trip? It’s only half a day’s carriage ride, after all~! That was inland too, and we didn’t have any enclaves either, so I never got to travel anywhere else.

I’d only ever seen the ocean in pictures, so I was suddenly super hyped. “I’ve never seen the sea, so I really want to go!” I insisted, clenching my hands into excited fists.

“That’s great. The sun is quite bright out there, so you’ll be able to enjoy the beautiful cobalt blue ocean.”

“That’ll be great!”

Sparkling, beautiful sea! I’m so excited!

Since I was so excited about it and we had the time, it was decided that we’d spend a few days in the villa by the sea. It was half a day’s carriage ride there, so we’d end up a full day away from Rozhe in the end. After breakfast, we quickly got ready and left for the villa.

The sun’s bright light looked somehow different as we headed over the beautifully maintained highways. Rather than “bright,” maybe “blinding” was a better description. I was shocked by the realization that something like *sunlight* could change with your location, but apparently the reason it was blinding was actually the

town itself.

Everything in the town was white, and it all reflected the sunlight back at us to a dazzling degree. Unlike the reddish walls of Le Pied, this place was covered in white plaster. All roofs and balconies in sight were blue, and they only served to make the town look even brighter.

This territory was called Le Cœur de la Mer.

“This is the Fisalis’s port. Flür uses it for commerce, so we often see ferries from the Kingdom of Amber and trading vessels from other foreign countries. If you’re lucky, you can sometimes catch some interesting-looking foreign boats,” Mr. Fisalis explained while I sat with my face plastered to the window, awed by a view I’d never seen before.

As the carriage rocked down the coastal road, I could see lots of different boats of varying sizes anchored in the harbor. That must be the trade center, just like Mr. Fisalis said. *So, they’ve got international trade too, huh? I see why the duchy is so rich.*

Mr. Fisalis looked out the window, seemingly searching for something, before he plopped back down on his seat in defeat. “I can’t see any foreign ships there today. I’d like to show you one while we’re here, but unfortunately, I can’t make any promises.”

It seems that he’d been looking for interesting boats. *Oh, don’t feel bad. I’m just happy you tried!* “It would be nice to see one! Where is the villa, anyway?”

“Farther down the road... on top of that hill there. The scenery is breathtaking. Behind the building is a steep cliff, with the sea right at the bottom of it. The view over that cliff is something else. It’s one of the things I really wanted you to see. And the sea breeze feels wonderful this time of year.”

Following where he was pointing, I saw a building that must have been the villa. It sat on top of what looked like a hill from the land, but was apparently a sheer cliff on the side facing the sea. And that sea breeze! *The location is amazing! If it’s enough to impress Mr. Fisalis, the view must be incredible too, but I definitely can’t let myself lean too far towards it. Danger level MAX.*

The Le Cœur villa was even more compact than the Le Pied one, and was painted white to match the town. It was a beautiful, breezy manor, with the sun illuminating the flowers and greenery surrounding it. Inside, it was quite cool. Though it was the same kind of well-used building as our manor in Rozhe, it was built with just the Fisalis family in mind and the furnishings were casual, making it a calming space.

“It’s not very big, huh? I like how it looks made just for the family!”

I immediately had Mr. Fisalis give me a tour, looking it over. *Why does it feel so nice? Ah, I see. It's because it's about the same size as my family home! So that makes it feel more familiar. And it's not lavishly furnished, and the things that are here are very casual, so I won't have to worry about them. I get it! It looks like home!*

"This villa is separated into a main house and outbuildings, so when we have guests, we use those. They're lined up along the cliffs," he explained.

"Lined up... You mean there's more than one?"

"We've got one building with a big hall for entertaining guests, and a few little cottages to house them. But my parents aren't very social, so they haven't seen much use lately."

So, the outbuildings are leftovers from a previous duke who was more flashy. The main house is small, but the grounds sure aren't. Gotta hand it to rich people... Wait, how many times have I thought that on this trip? I mean, I thought they were plenty rich back in Rozhe, but this trip is putting them on a whole other level.

"Now, you're probably tired from the trip, so we'll leave exploring the town and looking at the guest quarters for tomorrow."

"Alright."

After we'd made a full lap of the villa, we ended up standing outside the room prepared for us. *Nope, not arguing anymore. I've given up.* Just as I was about to touch the doorknob, Mr. Fisalis stopped me. *Huh? Am I not supposed to go in?* I looked up at him, confused.

"You can see the evening sun sinking into the ocean from our room. It's got a different charm than the sunset in Le Pied, but it's just as beautiful," he explained, putting his hand on the knob instead.

The sun sinking into the ocean? What does he mean? "I wanna see, I wanna see!" I looked up at him, excited, only to receive a mysterious smile.

"Okay. Go on in," he said, throwing the doors open, giving me a panoramic view of the evening sun sinking into the sea. But rather than just a window, the *whole wall* facing the sea was made of glass. It made the wall look like a giant painting of the ocean sunset. We'd even caught the exact moment the sun had started to sink below the horizon, and the sea was shining orange.



“Wow! It’s so beautiful!” I dashed full speed right up to the window. Not gonna go out on any balconies—way too dangerous.

“Why not step outside?” Mr. Fisalis suggested as I plastered myself against the glass. He chuckled, opening the door to the balcony.

Even the door is made of glass! So fancy! “Nah, I don’t want to risk getting blown into the ocean by a stray gust of wind.”

“You don’t need to worry there. The rails are high, so you’d have to make quite the effort to get over them and fall. Ahahaha! You really say the funniest things, Viola.”

Looking closely, I realized the railings were about to my chest. *Guess I’m safe, then.* “It’s just my first time being this high up,” I said, trying to defend myself. How far down was the surface of the water from here? I’d be too terrified to look down.

“Let’s go outside, since we have the chance. It’ll be fine. I’ll hold you.” He pulled my hand, leading me out onto the balcony.

The wind wasn’t as strong as I’d been worried it would be, so it didn’t look like I was about to be blown off. And I had Mr. Fisalis behind me as a lifeline, to boot! I’d be able to enjoy the sunset without fear.

“I won’t hold back, then,” I said, grabbing the rail as I admired the sunset, and Mr. Fisalis gently shielded me from behind. Perfectly safe sunset viewing.

It’s so pretty... I don’t think I’d ever get bored of this view...

...

Wait, isn’t he really, really close?

3 — A Bit Self-Conscious

You could see not only the ocean from the balcony, but the port we'd passed in the afternoon too. And that wasn't even the end of it—there was an entire seaside panorama spread out in front of me. I might have been way too close to Mr. Fisalis, but I'd cast aside my idle thoughts so I could keep enjoying the sunset!

Gripping the railing tightly (don't wanna fall off!), I saw the orange slowly turn to deep indigo, and I watched the two colors melt into each other. The sunset on the hill in Le Pied was beautiful too, but this was my first time ever seeing the ocean, so it was especially moving. *Getting this breathtaking view all to myself... How luxurious! I'm super satisfied!*

"Is the view to your liking?" asked the anchor behind me—or rather, Mr. Fisalis—as I was moved by the sunset's beauty.

Oh, I said 'all to myself,' but I'm not actually alone, am I? Okay, I'll adapt (to what?). "Yes! It's so lovely... I was so moved! The evening sun sinking into the sea was beautiful!"

I looked up at him, only for him to chuckle at me. *Ah, maybe it was childish to get so excited about this. And my heart might just pound a bit seeing him smile as gently as the sea in front of us. Wait, am I starting to feel kinda weird here? This is all because of that stuff he said last night.*

My mind flashed back to the day before. All of this, on top of him holding me in his arms from behind. I quickly ripped my eyes away from him, looking embarrassed. But that didn't do anything for my pounding heart. *Ah, geez... it's pounding because I'm standing on a balcony over a cliff and because he's standing so close. That's all.*

As I tried to make sense of my racing heartbeat, he tilted his head questioningly. "What's wrong?"

Damn, he's sharp. He's getting really attuned to even my tiniest facial expressions. I don't have much of a poker face, but I'm gonna have to be careful not to show too much. It'd be super embarrassing.

"Ah, I guess I'm just a little light-headed from looking down and seeing how high up we are. Aha! ☆" I said, trying to fool him with a smile.

"Oh, you're afraid of heights? Rest assured, I'd never let you fall. Now you can look anywhere you like." He smiled back at me.

"Ha ha ha... Yep..." One of the arms that was holding the rail next to me wrapped around my waist.

This is even safer... Not! It's just closer! Ghh... He's got me even more trapped... But even after saying all that, I do feel calmer being safely nestled in his arms. He looks so slender, but I can feel his supple muscles pressing up against me. He really is a true knight!

Wait. I was supposed to be watching the sunset, not losing myself in all these weird thoughts. Forget about the heart pounding and muscles. Sunset, look at the sunset!

But by the time I looked back, the sun had already been swallowed by the sea. I could only spot a tiny bit of orange left on the horizon.

Ahhh, I should've paid more attention! It's because I was thinking things I shouldn't be thinking about. I'll have to watch it from the balcony again tomorrow night. I can really take my time to enjoy it then!

Mr. Fisalis watched over me as I was lost in my thoughts of seeing the sunset the next day, before he finally said, "Let's go to the other side of the port tomorrow."

Oh, so we're going to the other side of the port tomorrow, huh? I won't be able to watch the sunset from the balcony, then... Wait, what?

"The other side of the port?" Looking to where he was pointing, I saw a hill on the other side of the twilight port.

"We'll be going over that hill."

"Wow... It looks super steep..."

Can you even hike up a slope like that? I can see a winding path up if I squint, but it must really be bad if you need to zigzag up the side. I say this a lot, but... I was raised in the capital, so I've never climbed a mountain path before. I've got a lot of stamina from working with the servants every day, but it might not last me all the way to the top. I-I'll try, though. But why are we gonna go mountain (hill?) climbing when we're at the seaside?

"There's something wonderful on the other side of the port that I want to show you," Mr. Fisalis explained, seeing my puzzled look.

With the evening sun in Le Pied and the sun setting into the ocean today, Mr. Fisalis has shown that his choices of superb views are nothing to sneeze at. That means I should probably be looking forward to tomorrow. I'm kinda getting excited! "Alright. I'll look forward to it."

Mountain climbing, huh? I'll have to wear something easy to move in tomorrow, then!

The next day:

Once we'd finished breakfast, Mr. Fisalis told me that we'd be leaving as soon as I was ready, and urged me to make preparations for our journey to the other side of the hill.

"I should probably wear something comfortable, shouldn't I?" I checked with Mr. Fisalis as he looked through documents given to him by Rohtas. I'd probably die if I was told to tackle that zigzag mountain

path I saw earlier in fancy clothing. I'd definitely suffocate if I was squeezed into a corset, and I'd twist the hell out of my ankles in dainty heels.

"Hmm, it might be a little difficult if you wear something restrictive, maybe? I don't think it matters much," he answered with a little groan, but that wasn't really an answer at all.

"Don't say 'whatever you want,'" I warned, glaring.

"Then wear something light."

"Alright. Are we just going and then coming back tonight? How long will it take?" I wanted to know the schedule, since I wanted to watch the sunset again.

"We've got another villa on the other side, so I thought we could take it easy once we're there."

Seriously? Didn't expect that answer.

"...How many villas do we have...?"

"Hmm... I dunno." He started counting on his fingers. *Wait, more than you can count on one hand!?* All I could do was watch, dumbfounded. "So you should bring enough with you for two, maybe three nights."

And now we're staying the night. And why the hell would he have another villa that close to this one!? Shouldn't it be one per region!? (Oh, that's just my family, huh☆) The duchy's wealth is always surprising, but this villa situation is just on a different scale entirely. Whew.

"We'll be bringing Rohtas and our maids, as well."

He's trying to tell me we'll be just fine staying there... No, that's not why I'm speechless... Whatever. He wouldn't understand, anyway.

We'd be going beyond the hill. I would've liked to have a casual outing like the one in La Pied, but this was starting to be a serious undertaking.

"...Our little trip is getting kinda grandiose, huh?"

"Then would you prefer to leave Rohtas and the others here? Ah, that's true—taking it easy, just the two of us, might be..."

"Wha—!?"

"I said, just the two of us—"

He was smiling like he'd had a great idea, but I reacted too strongly to the words "just the two of us." *Hnnnnn, I don't think my heart could handle being alone with him after last night. And knowing him, he'd want to cuddle, too. He always sits right beside me on the sofa, and holds my hand when we're going anywhere, and we were snuggled up so close last night as we watched the sunset... Gyaaah!*

I shook my head roughly to get rid of the vision of us on the balcony the night before.

"Ahhh, I can take care of myself, but you should probably bring someone who's used to getting you ready. You shouldn't

inconvenience yourself, so let's bring the maids! We've all come so far from Rozhe, after all—we should go sightseeing together! We should definitely bring everyone!" I cut him off, talking over him. *Ah, I'm out of breath.*

I felt like he'd keep making my heart race whenever we were alone together, so I wanted to avoid it.

"...Oh, okay."

Ah, Mr. Fisalis, don't look so disappointed.

Since I'd figured out what I was going to wear, I headed back to my room to get ready. Putting on a dress I could easily move in, paired with low-heeled boots that were great for walking, I was all set.

"I've only seen it from far away, but it looks super steep compared to the hill in Montjuc. I don't think we'd be able to make it by carriage, so we must be walking, right? Will I actually be able to climb all the way up there? He didn't mention how far away the other villa is, so I'm not sure if I could make it on foot," I complained to Stellaria, thinking about the slope I'd seen the night before.

"Oh, of *course* you aren't walking. Don't worry—you'll be taking a palanquin," she replied.

Huh? Palanquin? Those are those things that *people* carry, right? People, not horses!?

"W-we're going on palanquins!?" I asked for confirmation, startled at the unexpected method of transport. Almost all travel was by carriage. I'd only ever seen palanquins when the king and queen themselves were parading. And I'd be riding in something *that intimidating!*?

"As you correctly guessed, the hill in La Cœur is too steep, and the path too thin, for carriage travel. That's why they've always used palanquins to get to the summit," Stellaria explained, adding that this was all knowledge she'd gathered from the other servants, since she'd never been here before herself.

"But using *manpower*..."

Horses pull carriages, so no one feels bad about using them, but I couldn't handle the fact that palanquins moved using manpower... I'd always thought of them as some ultra-high-class vehicle, so this was all way too much for me.

"Ah, but everyone around here uses them to get up that hill. And the porters are usually sailors. They carry palanquins to make money while they're on land, so it would actually be worse for you *not* to make use of them."

"Huh? Really?" I blinked in shock, since it was a lot different from the super-fancy noble vehicle I was imagining. So, they were actually the standard here, huh? And as for the porters, I'd have no choice but to use them if this was how they made their living on land.

“Yes. It’s the duty of a ruler to create jobs and advance the economy.”

“Aahh... You’re right.”

“That’s why you need to go out of your way to employ them,” she chided coldly, making me shrink back.

“...I can see where you take after Dahlia...”

“I get that a lot.”

Lords create jobs for their citizens and do their best to pay them for their services. I knew that. I knew that in my head, but...

Back at home, we were always poor, so I’d completely forgotten that we should have been putting money into the economy. And on top of that, I’d always been thrifty. I did always think that, as nobles, we should actively *earn* money on behalf of our citizens, but that’s a bit different.

Duhhhhhh. That’s right. I’m not a plain lady from a poor earl’s house anymore... Even after marrying into the duchy, I’ve still been acting like I did back at home, trying to save money anywhere I could. But this is what Mr. Fisalis and Mother Fisalis were always thinking about.

The luxury I’d only seen as “a waste of money”—shopping all the time, Mr. Fisalis’s lavish meals—they were all part of the duties of being a (high-ranked!) noble!

Thinking back, the dresses that Mother Fisalis and Mr. Fisalis had made for me for the trip were all made in Madame Fleur’s boutique—but her apprentices had done the real work. We’d gotten them extraordinarily cheap, but Madame Fleur said it would be good training for all of them.

By using their money, they’d helped someone else... That’s not a waste of money at all, but the proper use of it. So would that mean that Mr. Fisalis was actually *thinking* when he wasted... Cough, cough, I mean, *used* his money? Hmm, but this is Mr. Fisalis we’re talking about. Was he really thinking about anything at all?

“So, Mother Fisalis and Mr. Fisalis’s ‘splurges’ actually had meaning, huh?”

“It’s something they pick up naturally, so they probably wouldn’t think of it exactly that way,” Stellaria answered.

Hrm, I see. They’ve learned to do it without thinking! I can see what a difference rank makes.

“I get it. They’ve been rich their whole lives, after all. In my case, if I didn’t do all that consciously, it would be impossible for me.” *I’m super aware of it right now, but I can definitely see myself falling back into those thrifty habits if I don’t focus! Since I was born in a house where scrimping and saving was the family motto, that stingy mindset was deeply ingrained. I’m so bad at this.*

I wouldn’t have noticed if it hadn’t been pointed out, but I’ve

actually been acting spoiled. I'm not the daughter of a poor earl anymore...

Wait, I already went through that bit.

Hearing Stellaria's reasonable explanation felt like a major wakeup call. I never thought I'd be this aware of my shortcomings!

Stricken, I hobbled over to the bed and fell face first onto it.

"M-Madam!? What's wrong? Are you feeling ill?" Stellaria was panicking.

"Ah, I'm fine. It's just that I've seen the light."

"What?"

"I'm regretting some things," I clarified, speaking into the pillow.

"Alright..." She said, puzzled.

It'll just be a waste of time if I lie here regretting it. I can't help what's already happened. It just means I need to try from now on! Okay, I'm back!

"...I can't be like this right now. Wasteful spending might be bad, but it's important to use the money you've got appropriately, too."

"Yes?"

"Okay! I'm good!" I psyched myself up, jumping to my feet.

Landing lightly, I fixed my dress, which had been messed up during my dive onto the bed. "Mr. Fisalis must be waiting, so let's get going," I said.

"A-alright."

Stellaria must've been puzzled by my hectic mood changes. *Sorry! But we're going up the hill, right? I've never been on a palanquin before, so I'm kinda looking forward to it now! I'm being so positive...*

4 — Heart Pounding, in More Ways Than One

Since we were bringing enough luggage to stay for a few days, we had to take a carriage to the base of the hill we'd eventually be climbing in palanquins. The area was close to both the sea and mountains, and we only had to head a bit inland from the harbor to the base of the slope.

"It looks steep from up close, too," I muttered, gazing up at the hill before me. I'd thought it looked steep from far away, but now that I saw it close up, I was *really* sure. I had to strain my neck to look up, after all.

"Yes. The others and I would probably be fine on foot, since we train regularly, but it might be difficult for a lady. Now, let's get going. Hold on tight!"

"Okay... Wait, what!?"

Mr. Fisalis had gotten out of the carriage first, and I'd taken his hand when he offered it as per usual. But then he pulled me close, carrying me in his arms. Out of shock, I clung to him. *What's with the princess carry? I could've gotten down myself if he'd just held my hand.*

"Um, Mr. Fisalis? Why are you carrying me?" I timidly asked.

"The step to get into the palanquin is pretty high. I thought you might have trouble."

"Oh, okay." He said it so matter-of-factly, and with such a big smile, that I was about to accept it, but...

"The step to get in is fairly high, so use this stepladder to get up."

"Alright."

I heard the voices of Rohtas and the maids behind us. Looking over my shoulder, I saw that while the palanquins were about waist-height, and thus would be a bit too high to climb into easily, they gave you a *freakin' stepladder!* The three of them used it to get inside easily.

"...Mr. Fisalis?"

"Yeeees~?"

He totally got me. Mr. Fisalis looked away, whistling as I glared up at him. He knew! Ignoring my glare, he quickly walked up to our palanquin ride and set me on the seat first. Then he jumped in easily after me. *Ah, so he didn't need one, huh!? ...Not.*

There was a lot more I wanted to say, but preparations were complete and we were off. Each palanquin was carried by four

porters. Mr. Fisalis and I were in one, while Rohtas and the maids were in the other. In front of and behind us were a few guardian knights (on foot!). And so, our group started slowly climbing up the hill.

The seats were covered in fluffy cushions and there were railings on the sides, so I probably wouldn't accidentally fall out, and there was a canopy on top to keep us out of direct sunlight—all in all, it was a pretty nice ride. Since I was on the other side of Mr. Fisalis, I could see a view of the ocean. It was great!

"The shimmering water is so beautiful! It looks different from how it did last night." I was so happy about the view that I gripped the railings and looked out.

"Whoa!"

Suddenly, the palanquin shook violently. It seemed like they'd had to dodge a big rock or something, but since I was on the edge and leaning out pretty far, it was enough to make me start falling out.

"That's dangerous!" Mr. Fisalis saved me with a quick yank from behind.

"Whew. That was close~!" *Whoops. Good job, Mr. Fisalis! I would've gone out the window if it wasn't for you!*

The porters were on the verge of stopping after hearing me kick up a fuss, but Mr. Fisalis told them to keep going. They were being as slow and steady as they could manage, but it still rocked. I should've been more careful.

"I didn't realize it would shake that much."

"Yeah. You shouldn't be leaning out. Now I'm worried about only having railings keeping you in, so hold on to me."

"Okay."

He had great balance because of all his training, but I was rocking back and forth with the palanquin's every move, so he pulled me close by the shoulder. It made me feel better, so I just let him hug me.

I really do feel steadier when I lean on him. This and the balcony incident are really making him into my lifeline. It's handy, so thanks☆

With my new lifeline to cling to, I felt comfortable enough to look back at the sea and the path we'd gone up, but...

"Urk!!" I thought we'd only been climbing for a short while, but we were already pretty high up. It wasn't a 'hill' anymore, but a full-blown cliff. I could see the ocean almost directly below us. I'd been happy to get the seaside seat, since the view was great, but now I was really wishing I was on the inside instead. *I didn't exactly get a choice, though.*

"Are you okay? You probably shouldn't look down," Mr. Fisalis said, noticing that I'd started to tremble once I saw how high up we were.

“You’re right, but I kind of already did.”

He looked at me, laughing with that bright smile of his. I was pretty used to his sparkling grin by now, but my heart still fluttered seeing it this close up. And thinking a bit more rationally about it, we were still super close together... *Wait, hasn’t this been happening a lot? Is it because he’s been so clingy lately? Or is it just because we’ve been in a lot of heart-pounding situations?*

“Hmm...” I groaned while I tried to figure out exactly why my heart was fluttering so much.

“What’s wrong?” Mr. Fisalis looked closely at my face.

Seeing his beautiful dark-brown eyes, my heart started pounding even harder. Then, as a test, I tore my eyes off of him and glanced down.... Heart still pounding! Anywhere I looked made my heart race. How was I supposed to calm down? The best I could do was look back at Rohtas and the others.

“No... Well, it’s not really anything...”

“But you’re thinking about *something*, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Hmm, I was just thinking that if I was riding with Stellaria or Rosa instead, my heart wouldn’t be pounding like this.” I stopped before I started talking about how much more *fun* that would have been.

“Huh? Who would I ride with, then?”

“Rohtas, of course.”

“No. No way.” Mr. Fisalis immediately refused, getting cranky.

“...Right.” *He really doesn’t wanna sit with Rohtas, huh?*

“If I was stuck with Rohtas, I’d have to talk about work the whole time instead of enjoying the view.”

“Ah... that’s true.”

“I bet he brought all the paperwork with him, too,” he sighed wearily.

“Hahaha!” I couldn’t help but burst out laughing at how easily I could imagine it.

While we chatted about Rohtas, I actually heard him sneeze from the palanquin behind us.

After all that chat and sightseeing, we finally made it to the top.

The hill was like a peninsula that stuck out into the sea; from a different angle, it looked like a completely separate island. The hilltop villa was in a spot that you couldn’t see from the Le Cœur one, but you could still get an unbroken view of the ocean from it. It was another well-used, wonderful villa about the same size as the other, and the white plaster walls were blindingly bright. It was still before noon, so it seemed like it hadn’t even taken us that long to get there.

They carried the entire palanquin right into the villa for us. After we got out, we left the sunlit entranceway, which was outfitted with

lots of windows, and went to the salon. Rohtas and the maids went to unpack our things in the bedrooms, so I assumed we'd eat lunch and just chill out there.

"No time to relax."

"Huh?" Without giving me a moment for a break, Mr. Fisalis took my hand and led me back *out* of the salon. "What? We just got here! Where are we going? What about lunch?" I asked.

"There's a spot I want to show you. We'll be going out again, but we need to hurry so we can get there while it still looks beautiful. I only want to show you the best views, after all! Hold on tight!"

"What!? Gyah!" He scooped me up again and put me back into the palanquin we'd just gotten out of. *Just let me use the damn stepladders! Where the heck are we going, anyway? We just got here!*

"And hurry!" Mr. Fisalis told the porters.

"Got it!" They picked the palanquin up, so they must have already known where we were going.

"Have a nice trip." Rohtas and the maids were apparently staying at the villa, and had popped out to see us off before I'd even noticed.

It looked like the guardian knights were coming along on foot, too. At Mr. Fisalis's command, the palanquin hurried along at an even faster pace than we'd been going on the way up, rocking.

"Wait, it's swaying too much because you told them to hurry!"

"Sorry, sorry. We need to hurry a bit if we want to see it. Just hold on to me."

"Okay!" *You don't have to ask! I would've done it anyway!*

Luckily, it wasn't as steep as it had been on the way up — it was more of a gentle downhill path. *Why are we going down when we've just come all this way up?* Leaning into the sway as we headed to our mystery destination, I finally realized that we'd reached the ocean again. There was a little wharf there, but unlike the harbor in Le Cœur, it only had smaller boats. It must have been a private wharf. I figured it must be right behind the harbor.

Mr. Fisalis carried me out of the palanquin, yet again. *Please, please, just let me use the stepladder!*

"Are we going on a boat?" I asked.

The wharf had a bunch of little boats that looked like they might seat about ten people at most. And hanging on the side of some of the boats were *even smaller* boats, big enough for maybe four people. Were they for your luggage? Evacuation? I mean, it didn't really matter, but...

"Yep, we're boarding right now," Mr. Fisalis said, hopping onto one of the boats with me still in his arms. The palanquin porters and the knights hopped on too, and we were seemingly ready to go. The porters changed classes into rowers—*Two for the price of one, nice!*—

and the boat slowly left the shore.

The ocean waves were calm, so the small boat didn't do much rocking. And the calmness of the waves meant the water was so clear I could see the bottom, despite how deep it was.

"Wow! I can actually see the fish swimming!!"

"The water is clear out here, so it should be a great view."

"I've never seen saltwater fish before! Scratch that—I've never been on the ocean before, either!"

"Rozhe isn't near the sea, after all. And your family's territory wasn't close to it either, was it?"

"Nope! I could see freshwater fish, but not any saltwater ones! I've only ever seen them at the market... Ah!" I realized how worked up I was over all these firsts.

"Ahaha! That's just like you," Mr. Fisalis said, completely calm.

The boat seemed to be heading around the hill peninsula, rowing towards Le Cœur. Right behind the villa—or rather, the peninsula's highest point—was a sheer cliff. Because of how the waves hit it, the place where the cliff met the water looked like it'd been gouged out of the rock. While I was wondering why we'd stopped here...

"We'll be moving to the smaller boat now," he said, pointing to the little boat attached to the side of our craft. *So it wasn't for emergencies or luggage, but for us! It's so tiny, though...*

Mr. Fisalis and I, plus one rower and knight each, piled into the little boat that could fit four, maybe five people at max. The other rowers and knights stayed behind on the main boat. Even though the boat *looked* like it could seat all of us, it was still a pretty tight fit, since the other passengers were all well-built men (including Mr. Fisalis!). *We're not gonna sink from the weight of all this muscle, right? Right!?*

And for SOME reason, I ended up sitting on Mr. Fisalis's lap.

"Um... I can sit on my own," I informed him with a glare.

"Never mind that," he smiled.

What the heck do you mean by 'never mind that'? You've been picking me up all day. And we're snuggled close together, yet again. My heart's not gonna last if both you and the boat keep making it race like this!

We'd switched boats, but I still didn't know where we were going, and being on the huge ocean in such a tiny craft was making me worried. As I sat there fretting about the destination, the little boat drifted away from the other one and started heading straight for the cliffs.

Where are we even going!? We're gonna crash into that cliff! "Is it okay to go this way!?" The sea is calm, but what if we hit something?" We were heading towards what was basically a sheer rock wall. What would happen if we hit *that*? I clung tighter to Mr. Fisalis and he put

his hand over mine.

“Look right there,” he said, pointing to the boundary where the cliff met the sea with a reassuring smile. There, if I looked closely beyond the waves, was a little opening. It was just about big enough for the tiny boat to fit through.

“There’s... a hole?”

It kept disappearing behind the waves. Was there a cave down there or something?

“Yep. And we’re going inside of it.”

“Huh!?” The hole was just a bit wider than the boat we were on, and it would barely fit through height-wise. How would we get inside!? Was he serious!? I looked around, shocked by his words, only to see the knight and rower smiling back at me, not surprised in the least. How were they okay with this!? Was this normal!? I looked up at Mr. Fisalis, dumbfounded.

“We’ll duck down on the oarsman’s signal. If you’re scared, just hug me tight,” he said, pulling me closer.

Of course I’m scared!!! ...Ahem. Sorry. Getting a bit shaken up, there. Whatever. I’ll cling if I have to!! I wrapped my arms around him, totally done with all of this.

“Well then, I’ll handle the timing, so please duck... now,” the oarsman said.

We all leaned forward. Lying horizontally like this, we were just about as tall as the edge of the boat. *I’m gonna cling to Mr. Fisalis like this. Or, wait, this is more like fully embracing him. Whatever.* My heart was racing, but I still had my lifeline, so I was sure I’d be fine. But being so close to him made my heart flutter, too.

Ah, it’s happening again! I couldn’t tell what was making my heart pound so badly!

As we waited, the rower found the best moment to head into the crack in the cliffside. Since it was so bright outside, my eyes weren’t used to the darkness; once inside, I couldn’t see anything at all. It was pitch black.

“It’s okay to sit up now.”

At the oarsman’s signal, we all slowly sat back up, and I saw that we were in a dark cave. I looked around once my eyes started to adjust and saw that the cave was shockingly large compared to how small the entrance was. Everything above the water was pitch black, but the water itself was shining bright blue.

It’s like magic! “It’s so big on the inside! And it’s beautiful how the water is shining!” I leaned out of the boat a little bit and saw that the water here was still clear enough to see straight to the bottom.

“Isn’t it? You really couldn’t tell from the entrance, could you? Oh, and don’t lean out so far. It’s much deeper than you’d think,” Mr.

Fisalis said, tightening his arms around me. Having him to hold on to really made me feel safe, though!

“Okay! But if I fall in, you’ll rescue me, right?”

“Of course. But I’d never let you fall in the first place.”

“Right?” I was looking this way and that, admiring the view as we passed.

“But you haven’t seen the best part yet. Do it,” he said, signaling to the rower. I looked up at him, wondering what he meant.

“As you wish,” replied the rower, turning the boat back around. And the moment we faced the entrance again...

“—!!”

The sunlight coming in from the small entrance lit up the water in bright blue sparkles. It was shining even brighter than it was deeper inside. Seeing the contrast between the dark cave and the shining blue water was so gorgeous, I couldn’t make a sound.

“Isn’t it breathtaking?” Mr. Fisalis pulled me close, whispering in my ear as I sat there speechless, and it was all I could do to nod back. “I know you’re moved by its grandeur, but you *do* need to breathe, Viola.”

“Buwaha!! It’s so pretty, I completely forgot! Ah~ I thought I’d die...”

“Try to remember that ‘breathtaking’ is a figure of speech, okay?”

5 — Raining in Le Pied

We stayed at the villa on the hill for another two days. I had Mr. Fisalis take me back to the cave again at a different time, but it seemed that our timing had been most perfect on that first day.

After that, we went back to the Le Cœur villa and stayed there for another three or so days—exploring the seaside, watching strange foreign boats, and enjoying the wonderful sunset before heading back to Le Pied.

We'd been graced with great weather for the first ten days, but unfortunately, it was raining today. You know what *that* means. Rain → Rohtas comes to invite me for dance lessons with a smile → Absolutely grueling training. That grim timeline of events sprung to the forefront of my mind.

I might've been on vacation with Mr. Fisalis, but Rohtas had come, too! There wasn't a dance studio like back at our manor, but Rohtas would probably say something like, "You can dance anywhere," so I wasn't gonna say anything.

As I trembled with fear, waiting for him to come call me for lessons, it turned out that he'd been talking with Mr. Fisalis since morning and didn't have time for dancing. *I'm definitely not gonna bring it up! No way I'm poking the hornet's nest!*

But after a while, I was actually getting kind of bored. The men were in the living room, sifting through a mountain of paperwork and discussing things. I could hear them discussing stuff like Le Pied's exports and quotas and whatnot, so they must have been talking about something to do with the territory. Having nothing better to do, I watched Mr. Fisalis and thought about how this must be what he's like on duty, but I quickly got bored of that, too.

Usually, I'd just go roll around on my bed and cry about how bored I was, but I couldn't do something like *that* in front of him. Since I couldn't actually relax in the living room, I grabbed Stellaria and Rosa and snuck back up to our room.

"I dunno what they're working on, but they looked busy. But I finally have some alone time~" Entering the bedroom that I'd claimed as my own, I flopped down on the bed. *Ah, the cushy springs feel so nice! Since I've got some time to myself finally, I can lay around without worry! I mean, Stellaria and Rosa are here, but they know how I act normally, so I don't have to worry about them.*

“Yes. You’ve spent all of your time with the master since we arrived,” the maids laughed as they watched me stretch out on the bed.

“I’ve *never spent so much time with him*. Before we left on our trip, I’d been worried about what we’d even do to pass the time, but it’s actually been kind of nice. I’m actually pretty shocked by how many new things I’ve experienced. I guess I didn’t really think of it before now.”

“There are a lot of things you couldn’t see in Rozhe, after all.”

“Wasn’t the ocean fun?”

“Super fun! And the view was breathtaking,” I said, dreamily thinking back to all the stunning vistas I’d seen in Le Cœur. “But we can’t go anywhere with this weather. Usually on rainy days I’d have dance lessons with Rohtas or etiquette with Dahlia, or I’d just be mobbed by Mimosa’s spa squad, so I’d never get a chance to be bored. Actually, if I ever even *suggested* I was bored, they’d just dump more stuff to do on me. But since Rohtas is busy, I won’t have to have dance lessons today.”

Freedom from dance lessons tricked me into letting my guard down. As I blurted out the truth...

“Then in Rohtas and Dahlia’s stead, I’ll give you some lessons! You’re looking for something to do, aren’t you, madam?” Stellaria smiled at me with the enchanting smile she’d gotten from Cartham.

Ah, there was a hornet’s nest hiding here, too. Looks like I flipped some kinda switch! “Oh, no, no, no! I’m super busy! Being bored! Ohohoho!”

“You’re talking nonsense again, madam. But there’s not much I can do for you, since we’re not at the manor back in Rozhe.”

“...Really?”

“It’s barely anything at all.” Grin. There was no way I was gonna win against the pressure of that smile.

“O-okay, then...”

“Alright... Since you like moving, how about I give you some walking lessons?”

“Walking sounds great!” Walking was simple. It’d be fine. I jumped off the bed.

I had thought it’d be so easy to just walk, but...

“You’re wobbling. The book on your head is going to fall.”

“Huh!?”

Here we were, right smack in the middle of our walking lessons. I had a thick, heavy book on my head—just like you saw in pictures—with my back straight and a smile plastered on my face. Following Coach Stellaria’s instructions, I was walking from one end of the hall

to the other, over and over again.

I was actually really trying, here... She really must be Dahlia's daughter, because she's just as hard on me. She said we couldn't do much, but she's not going easy on me at all. It was a trick! I complained to myself.

"Come on, straighten your back! Your smile looks forced! Okay, turn! Be more elegant and lively!!"

"Waaaah..."

She was barking at me like a drill sergeant.

"Your stride is off."

"Grr, I shouldn't have worn a knee-length dress today! I would've been able to trick you in a long one~!" I wore knee-length dresses a lot because I liked them more, but that had worked against me today! But there's no crying over spilt milk—life is full of regrets!

"Oh, but that dress looks lovely on you, madam. Is it not to your liking?" She said it with a pout, but she *knew*. *Stellaria, you're playing dumb, aren't you?*

"It's not that! Kyaa!"

Thunk!

As I moved to retort, the book fell off of my head and right onto my foot! And it was a thick book, too, so it really hurt!

"OWW!!" I screeched, crouching down to rub my foot in pain.

"Oh, no! Madam, are you alright?!" Stellaria quickly pushed the book aside and removed my shoe.

"I'll bring something to cool it down!" Rosa ran towards the kitchen.

"What was that scream? Did something happen, Viola?"

"Are you alright?"

Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas had flown upstairs, hearing my scream.

Tearing up at the pain, I explained, "I yelled because I dropped a book on my foot."

"What? What were you even doing?"

"Walking lessons."

"Ah, well, that explains it, then... Is your foot alright?"

"Probably."

And so ended my hardcore walking lessons☆

Before we knew it, it was time for lunch. I ate with Mr. Fisalis, since he'd finished his work for now, and then we lazed about in the living room.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your rest, Master, but the supervisor of the mine is here to see you. He is in the foyer." Fennel walked in to announce this to Mr. Fisalis. Apparently, our guest didn't have an appointment.

"What does he want?" Mr. Fisalis asked, silently setting his teacup

back onto the saucer.

“He has brought some sample sapphires.”

“Alright. Let him in.”

Fennel bowed, before turning and leaving the living room. When he returned, a man I’d never seen before was following him. He was about Bellis’s age, tanned and manly.

“I’m Oregano, the mine’s supervisor. We’ve dug up the sapphires as you ordered, so I’ve come to show them to you.” He reached into his bag and carefully took out something bundled up in a silk cloth. Opening it, he showed us the gems inside.

Since they were samples, he’d brought several different ones, but... *Wow, they’re massive!!* It might’ve been because they weren’t cut yet, but every stone looked huge to me. I didn’t know anything about how gems were priced, but even I knew that big ones were probably expensive. I’d never seen any that size before.

“Huh, they’re quite large. The color isn’t too deep, nor is it too light, and I can’t see any defects at first glance,” Mr. Fisalis commented, picking each one up and looking at them as if all of this was totally normal.

“It’s true. They’re quite high quality,” Rohtas said, looking at them as well. *So size isn’t the only thing that matters in pricing, huh?*

“The sapphires we dig up are usually of reasonably high quality, but it’s rare that we see truly fine ones, much less top-class gems like these,” Oregano explained.

In my opinion, as someone who didn’t know much about the subject, they all looked like beautiful sapphires. As I looked at the sapphires in Mr. Fisalis’s hand, our eyes suddenly met. I tilted my head in confusion.

Mr. Fisalis just stared at me. Then looked back at the stone. Then back at me. He kept doing that for a while.

He’s done that before—when he named those ‘Viola Sapphires.’ I have a bad feeling about this. I had no idea why he was staring at me, but my face twitched, since I knew it couldn’t be good.

He suddenly smiled, turned to Rohtas, and said, “Okay. How about we name the top-class ones ‘Viola Eyes?’”

What the heck is this man saying!? Been a while since I’ve said that, huh... Wait, no. He just said he was naming the highest quality ones ‘Viola Eyes,’ didn’t he!? I already wanted him to stop calling them ‘Viola Sapphires’ because it hurt, and now this! I snapped back to reality once I understood what he said.

“N-n-n-n-no, you can’t! You can’t just name the highest quality gems something like ‘My Eyes’!!” Stuttering in a panic, I tried to stop him.

“Why? Your eyes are even more beautiful than these gems.”

Urk. I just vomited out some sugar. *Don't say something that sickeningly sweet with such an innocent face! Okay, yeah, my eyes might be blue-colored. But they're nowhere near as pretty as those jewels! They've been dimmed by my hard life!* I opened my mouth to argue again, but...

"That's a wonderful name. Let's call them that," Rohtas said, a smile spreading across his face.

No, wait! Rohtas! Stop him, you're supposed to stop him!! No matter how dirty a glare I shot at him, he just kept smiling. And it wasn't just him, either!

"I think so, too! Madam's eyes are quite beautiful, after all, so I'm sure the gems would love being called that!"

Oi, Oregano!! ...Sorry, I'm getting really worked up right now. I'm besieged on all sides!

"Right? We should absolutely call the biggest and best colored ones 'Viola Eyes.'"

"Alright. And the ones that are simply good quality will be called 'Viola Sapphires.'"

"And how about we sell the impure or damaged ones wholesale to artisans for their crafts, and process the smaller ones that aren't up to our standards at all into rubies like we've been doing up until now?"

"That's a great idea."

"We'll work even harder to dig up quality gems!"

"I'm counting on you."

While I was busy being overwhelmed, the men kept talking, and then it was too late to reverse the decision. *Seriously? Please, someone, stop them!* I could only sit there, listening to their conversation in a daze.

"But to think your affection for the Madam was so dazzling..." Oregano said to Mr. Fisalis once they were finished.

"You think so?"

OREGANO!! And don't act so embarrassed, Mr. Fisalis!

After they talked a bit more about the processing and distribution of the gems, Oregano finally left. We would be taking the sapphires he brought for us back to the capital as samples.

"We've already got some jewelers looking to do business with us, after all," Mr. Fisalis said carelessly. *Wait, isn't it way too soon for people to be asking after that kind of thing? It's only been a few days since you've decided to start dealing in sapphires.* You could just see the question marks flying off my head at this point.

"Ah, the day we decided to produce sapphires, we sent announcements to all the jewelers we'd worked with previously, telling them that we were going to start selling them," he explained. *Wow~ That's fast!*

"I see."

“Yes! So when we get back to Rozhe, we’ll have these samples made into necklaces, earrings—lots of different things! We’ll have to show them off, after all. How about we hold a debut party at our manor? Or should we just be proactive and go to lots of different parties?” He was happily talking about all our future plans, but... *You can’t just declare we’ll be going out in public more often like that! What’s wrong with how we’ve been doing it until now?*

“H-huh? Uh, wasn’t being social an optional thing? Even if we don’t debut the sapphires, they’re beautiful enough to sell well on their own, right?”

“Oh, no. They’re going to sell highly because you’ll be wearing them yourself!”

“No, nope!” I was at my wit’s end dealing with him saying all these things—and with his trademark sparkling smile, to boot.

“Also, I’m thinking of selling the trash stones for crafting. You wanted to buy some small things from the general store in town as souvenirs for the people in the manor, didn’t you? Just think—if we sold those little accessories on a larger scale, as regional handicrafts, it would be good income for our citizens. If we had not just that one general store, but the orphanage and other places like that making them, we’d be able to produce even more. The proceeds would work as operating funds for our territories.” He went on to explain in more detail how he imagined the funds would be used.

“Oooh~!” *That’s right. The shopkeeper said that the proceeds from their crafts would be going towards living costs for people with nowhere to go.*

“Even though we consider them trash stones, their price should go up since they’re from the same ore as the Viola Sapphires, don’t you think?”

“...I do.”

“And if the price of Viola Sapphires rises, then the price of our crafts will rise too, won’t it?”

“...They will.”

“So what do you need to do?”

“...Do my best to advertise.”

“Good girl!”

Mr. Fisalis had really turned up the pressure and I had no choice but to agree. He was lavishing praise on me, so why didn’t I feel happy about it? But he was right. I’d have to do my best as the duchess!

...I hate going out in public, but it’s kind of my job.

“Once we get back to Rozhe, let’s get these made into necklaces and earrings.”

“...Okay.” I knew that was part of my job as duchess, too.

“Master, how about we ask our usual jeweler to do it?” Rohtas joined in the conversation gleefully.

“That’s right. Let’s go with that,” Mr. Fisalis said, agreeing.

“If you’ll be holding a debut party, then how about commissioning a new gown to match the jewelry?” *Whoa, Stellaria joined the battle after vanishing into thin air up until now!*

“That’s a good idea. Have Madame come in for measurements as soon as we get home.”

“As you wish,” Stellaria said, smiling.

This was all right after I’d been lectured about my role as Duchess, so I couldn’t say no. *And I’d wanted to retire from social life, too...*

◆◆◆Idle Asides, No. 1 — Days Waiting at Home◆◆◆

The Fisalis manor in Rozhe, the capital. Breaktime with the maids in the servant's dining room (but not everyone, since they worked in shifts). Today, Mimosa has joined her maid compatriots for a chat.

"I wonder how long the Master and Madam will be gone on their territory viewing?"

"Hmm... they said that Master would have two weeks off, so they'll probably be back before that ends."

"That's not specific enough. Aah, it's been two days already, hasn't it?"

"Only two days."

"It's normal for the Master to be away, so I'm used to it, but it's so quiet without Madam around like she always is."

"Right?"

"She's been sneaking around behind the previous duke and duchess's backs to help us out lately, hasn't she? I can't get enough of the thrill."

"You're brave."

"Even dull days are fun when Madam is involved."

"Ah, I know, right?"

Each of them held their mugs and ate snacks as they chatted. Since Viola was always wandering... er, she was always *up and about*, it was quiet without her. The maids were all lonely without their bright, cheery Madam.

"But even though she's not home, we still have our jobs to do."

"Even though Rohtas isn't here, Dahlia still is, after all."

"Things are going normally because she's here."

"And the Master's father is here, too. It's completely the same."

The former duke was acting as butler while Rohtas was away, even wearing the same kind of clothes as he roamed the manor. Of course, he dealt with the merchants, too.

"The merchant's reactions are so funny, aren't they? They're all so shocked by the former Duke's sudden appearance."

"It's a shock, alright~"

"Ahahahaha~!"

The maids all laughed as they recalled the faces they'd seen the merchants make.

“We should just let him do as he pleases until he tires of it. No difference to us, anyway.”

“You’re right.”

They all smiled warmly at the thought of the previous duke playing butler.

“Ah~ I wonder what the territories are like?”

“Hmm, I dunno.”

The subject changed to the duchy.

“I’ve never been out of Rozhe.”

“I was born out in the country, but it was in a completely different area than the Fialis territories.”

“Grr... I wish I hadn’t lost the rock-paper-scissors tournament for who got to go with Master as his maid!!”

“Sucks, huh?”

One of them slammed her mug on the table in frustration. The other maids rushed to steady their own as they agreed with her.

“I would’ve been able to go if I wasn’t pregnant~!” Mimosa downed her herb tea, despairing.

“You couldn’t help it, Mimosa. It was just bad timing.”

“And if they’d taken you along, that would have brought out the Demon Lord.”

“I shudder to think about what’d happen if Mimosa was away for long...”

“Huh? What are you guys talking about?”

“Oh, just stuff.”

“Grrr~”

Mimosa was pouting cutely, but they had no idea what Bellis would do if Mimosa left him for long. Would he work without eating or sleeping? Would he cause a blizzard with the sub-zero temperatures around him? No one would be able to get anywhere near him when he was that angry! All of the maids shuddered at the thought of a Mimosa-less Bellis.

“But Mimosa doesn’t care about how pissy Bellis is, does she? She’ll just walk up and talk to him normally.”

“She can’t read the room.”

“And then Bellis just completely stops being unhappy and goes back to normal.”

“Whew, she’s so loved!” They all gave lukewarm smiles as they thought about how cute Mimosa was such an effective Bellis Neutralizer.

“Okay, calm down, everyone. We told Rosa to write us reports, so those should be here soon, along with the ones from Rohtas. Then we’ll know more about the territories and how Madam is doing.”

“That’s right!”

They all smiled as they thought about the territories. The fact that they'd go from worry, to relief, to excitement at Rosa's report about Le Pied a few days later was a different story.

"Everyone, time to get back to work." While they were chatting excitedly, they all heard Rohtas's voice announce the end of their break.

"Okaaaay! Wait, *Rohtas*? Huh!? What!?"

"No, it's not Rohtas!! It's Master's father!!!"

Though they answered out of habit, they realized there was no way that Rohtas could be there. Turning to the door in shock... There stood the former duke, smiling, with his wife beside him, also smiling—albeit a little bitterly.

"I was mimicking Rohtas. How did I sound?"

"J-just like him!!"

"Woohoo!"

"I'm sorry about my husband."

The maids stood at attention. The former duchess apologized with a strained smile. The former duke smiled happily. But while he was all smiles, the maids were all internally panicking, in cold sweats as they wondered how long they'd been standing there and listening.

"H-how long have the two of you been there?" A maid asked nervously.

"Hm? About when you started wondering what the territories were like." Answered the former duke blankly.

(SAFE!)

The maids were all relieved. Then...

"We'll go back to work~!" they said, scattering in all directions.

6 — I'm Home!

We were now down to the last three days of Mr. Fisalis's holiday.

Nearly being kidnapped by some thugs, having gems named after me, seeing the ocean for the first time (as well as some views that nearly moved me to tears) and, most importantly, Mr. Fisalis pouring his heart out, had made the time just fly by. It sure was an eventful vacation. I thought we'd probably be staying away from the manor for as long as possible, but...

"We should probably head back to Rozhe soon. Oh, but not straight home, actually. I'm thinking about stopping by some of our other territories on the way. We'll skip going to the south, though. It's still a bit rough down there, since the war just ended and all," announced Mr. Fisalis.

And so, we packed up the flowers and such we'd bought for souvenirs—and those sapphires, of course—and set off.

"Come back whenever you'd like!"

"Thanks."

"Thank you all~! We'll come back soon!"

"We'll be waiting!"

After saying goodbye to Fennel, Anise, and the other villa servants, we took the carriage to our next destination—a territory that was apparently famous for its baths. When we arrived, I saw lots of people lounging around in natural ponds full of steaming hot water (they really do have hot springs here!!!). These particular springs, it seemed, were for public use, and even commoners could visit them as long as they paid a small fee. Aside from those, supposedly there were special springs for upper-class merchants, and even more exclusive ones for nobles only.

And, of course, there was a private one in our villa!

"How have the water levels been lately?"

"No changes have been recorded since your last visit."

"We'd get a lot more visitors if we lowered the entry fee a bit, wouldn't we?"

"That's true. Let's do so."

Any chance they got, Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas would talk business—but they weren't all work and no play. Whenever I started spacing out, Mr. Fisalis would realize I was getting bored and strike up a conversation with me.

“Ah, I’m sorry for talking so much about work. Let’s *both of us* go to the springs later.”

Hmm? That almost sounds like he wants us to go bathe together, just us two. I must’ve misheard!

“Really? Yay! Stellaria, Rosa—Mr. Fisalis has given us the okay, so let’s go check out the springs later!”

“Oh, that will be wonderful~!”

I have no idea why Mr. Fisalis is glaring at me.

The maids and I headed to the duke’s hot springs the moment we arrived at the villa and had a warm, relaxing party, just us girls. Mr. Fisalis? He probably took a bath with Rohtas or something.

After spending a day there, we headed back to the capital. We’d be home for the first time in thirteen whole days!

They must have sent someone ahead, because all of the servants were already lined up in front of the manor when we got there. *This is just what I needed to feel like I’m truly home! Hm? Wait. Why is there a butler standing in the line? Rohtas came with us...*

I turned back to Rohtas, who was behind us, and he gave me a strained smile.

Oh. Father Fisalis must still be playing butler!

“Welcome home!”

“Welcome home, Cercis, Viola!”

“Welcome back, Vi!”

The servants all welcomed us back with their usual flawless greetings, while my in-laws gave us wide, welcoming smiles. Usually, I’d feel super awkward being greeted by everyone like this all at once, but this time it made me feel warm inside.



“You must be exhausted from your trip.”

“Did you have fun, Vi?”

My in-laws spoke first.

“Yes, I had a wonderful time!” A lot had happened, but I was super satisfied with my vacation, so I gave them one of my twenty dollar smiles. It was a special treat!

“That’s good. You’ve simply *got* to tell us all about it,” Father Fisalis said, taking my hand to lead me to the salon. But before he could whisk me away, Mr. Fisalis snatched me back, giving his father a sour look.

“We’ve just returned home, and we’re *very* tired.”

He curtly refused, but of course my in-laws didn’t care about their son’s mood.

“Oh, it’ll just be for a bit! Can’t we, Vi?”

I couldn’t say no to Mother Fisalis’s sparkling smile. “Oh, alright.”

“Viola!” Mr. Fisalis shot around to look at me, but... surely a little chat wouldn’t hurt.

“Let’s just have a nice, relaxing conversation, okay, Mr. Fisalis?” I said.

“...If you say so.”

And that’s how Father and Mother Fisalis managed to drag us into the salon the very moment we got home.

“We didn’t bring back any souvenirs for you, since you live there most of the time,” said Mr. Fisalis the moment he sat down on the sofa.

“As I expected,” replied Father Fisalis, sitting on a couch across from us.

“But I do have some things to report instead.”

“Ah... about the sapphires?”

“Yes. As I stated in my letter, I’ve decided to put some effort into distributing sapphires as well as rubies. Our mines seem to dig up so many quality stones, after all. We managed to be there just in time to get some samples—Rohtas, if you please.”

“Yes, milord.”

Called in by Mr. Fisalis, Rohtas brought the sapphires out on a gorgeous tray lined in velvet. *When the heck did he get time to send Father Fisalis a letter?* Rohtas set the tray down on the table in front of us. *Well, I suppose these are the Viola Sapphires.* Just the thought of having to hear about them again made me want to run away while I still had the chance.

Father Fisalis picked up one of the gems and held it up to the light, inspecting it closely just like Mr. Fisalis had done in Le Pied.

“Since we’d been so focused on producing rubies because they sell

for a higher price, we'd processed sapphires like these into artificial rubies. But, hearing that they dig out plenty of high-quality sapphires, I've thought to start selling them as sapphires instead. They might prove to be an important windfall during periods when we find fewer rubies, but most importantly, I believe these specimens will soon be in high demand as well," explained Mr. Fisalis as his father scrutinized the sapphires.

"Why do you believe they'll be in high demand soon?" Father Fisalis raised an eyebrow, only to receive an enigmatic smile from his son in response.

"We're going to name these sapphires 'Viola Sapphires.' Only the highest quality examples will be called that, of course. And Viola herself will show them off to high society."

"Hahaha! That's a great idea!"

"'Viola Sapphires'? Oh my, how wonderful! Vi, you *must* tell me all about them!"

Father Fisalis praised Mr. Fisalis's idea, while Mother Fisalis was still stuck on the name.

What? You want me to tell you about them!? Come on, Mr. Fisalis, you tell her! I glanced over at my husband.

"We'll have these sample gems made into jewelry for their big debut."

"Yes. They're all of excellent quality, so the result should be stunning."

"We've got the gems, so all we need to do now is contact the jeweler. But enough about that. I have some concerns about public order in our territories..."

"What, public order? Was there some kind of problem?"

Damn, they're already talking about work. I can't count on him. So I'm gonna have to tell her all about the naming thing myself? What kind of cruel torture is this? While I tried to find the words to explain, Mother Fisalis had already gotten herself worked up.

"'Viola Sapphires'! What an adorable name! Where did it come from? Oh, it must be your eyes, right? Oh, dear me—Vi's gone and clammed up out of embarrassment. I'm not gonna get anything from her. Ria, Rosa, give me all the details!"

You didn't really give me a chance to say anything! Talk about moving fast.

"Master decided on the name because the sapphires were the same color as Madam's eyes."

"Only the highest-quality sapphires will be called 'Viola Sapphires,' and only the very best of *those* will be granted the title of 'Viola Eyes.'"

"Oh my!"

Since she felt like she wouldn't get anything from me, Mother Fisalis called Stellaria and Rosa over instead. When she heard about the 'Viola Eyes,' she clapped her hands over her cheeks, twisting around in embarrassment. *I'm the one who ought to be embarrassed here...*

Having gotten our reports, my in-laws finally let us go to get some rest. After seeing them off as they left for the cottage, Rohtas escorted Mr. Fisalis and I up to our rooms.

"You must be exhausted too, Mr. Fisalis. Since you'll be going back to work tomorrow, make sure to rest well tonight," I said as we stood in front of his bedroom, just like we always did.

"Am I the only one a bit sad that we're going back to separate rooms after sleeping together for our entire holiday?" He put on the kicked puppy face. I could almost see the drooping ears and tail.

"If you're lonely, Rohtas will be there with you."

"Of course, Madam."

"That's not what I meant!" Rohtas gave a bright smile when I shifted the responsibility to him, but Mr. Fisalis shot it down immediately. *That was a fast retort!* I had to hold myself back from laughing at their back-and-forth.

"Leaving aside the issue of your loneliness, everything will be back to normal come tomorrow, so please do get some rest. Madam must be exhausted as well, so please, let her be for now." Rohtas wiped the smile from his face, going back to his usual serious expression as he shoved Mr. Fisalis into his own room.

"Ghhhh...! Fine..."

That only worked because we're back in our Rozhe manor! Rohtas's manhandling ended the discussion.

The next morning:

"I've forgotten how to work over my holiday! I'll have to stay home with Viola—"

"You'll remember once you're back on the job. Please stop mumbling."

"Have a good day!"

Mr. Fisalis whined about not wanting to go to work, only for Rohtas to kick him out calmly. I just smiled and waved.

This would be the first time he'd gone to work in a while. My in-laws also left together after breakfast, having been invited to a lunch-and-tea party at the Argenteias' manor.

Both my husband and in-laws were gone. I was F I N A L L Y free!

I still couldn't wear my usual maid uniform, but I did go straight to the servant's dining room. I had to pass out our souvenirs, after all!

I had Dahlia and Stellaria help me carry in the sapphire

accessories and flowerpots from Le Pied in, since I couldn't carry them all myself. I got a glare from Dahlia, but she let me gather all of the normal maids for a while so I could give them each their presents.

"What a lovely barrette!"

"Oh, Madam—souvenirs, too? You shouldn't have!"

"My, these are made with sapphires? The shades are all different... such a wonderful variety!"

"This isn't one of those 'Viola Sapphires,' is it? Ahh, too bad."

"Of course it isn't! We'd never be able to get anything as high-quality as a 'Viola Sapphire'!"

"These flowers are adorable."

"Ah, those are called andreanums. They only grow around Le Pied! I bought some, since they're so rare."

"I see!"

The maids all chattered away happily as they looked at the hair clips and andreanum buds I'd brought home.

But wait—how did they know about the 'Viola Sapphire' thing?

"Oh, no, those sapphires aren't even being sold yet. They might not end up being that expensive anyway. Maybe they won't even sell at all!" I rushed to play it down.

"But they've got your name, Madam! Of course they'll sell!" Their enthusiastic statement silenced me.

"You all already knew about the name thing, huh..." I mumbled.

"Of course we did! We grilled Stellaria and Rosa last night!" They all gave me a thumbs-up. *Argh, that look tells me they know all about the 'Viola Eyes,' too...*

We all stood around and chatted about my trip until Dahlia broke us up. Then the maids went back to their usual jobs, while I talked with Mimosa, had a nap (I didn't get much napping in on the trip!), and just generally relaxed.

Then, evening finally arrived. I headed to the entranceway to greet Mr. Fisalis, as per usual.

"I've been transferred," he announced happily after our customary welcome home hug.

Hm? Transferred? We're moving!? Wait, he must mean he's transferring jobs! So, he's leaving the special ops division!?

7 — He's Getting Transferred

Mr. Fisalis blurted out that he was getting transferred as soon as he got home from work!

I knew he'd been promoted back at the repatriation ceremony, but that's different from getting transferred, isn't it? What does he mean, then? Is he just moving up the ladder? He was already the commander of a division, so what would that make him now? I have no idea how the military works.

I was shocked by his sudden announcement, but Rohtas and the other servants looked equally surprised. So even Rohtas hadn't heard!?

You could just see the “ask me more!” aura radiating from Mr. Fisalis as we all stared at him blankly.

“So you're, uh, leaving the special ops division?” Calming myself down, I asked the question that must have been at the forefront of all our minds.

“That's right! I'll be moving to the royal guards.”

“Huh? Royal guards?”

The royal guards were responsible for the defense of the palace—mainly guarding the King and his family—so it would be quite different from the special ops division and front line work he'd been doing previously. They protected important figures and were literally the palace's last line of defense, so they were an elite squad chosen not only for their fighting skills, but for their brains too. Even I knew that, despite my lack of care—I mean, lack of *knowledge* about all that complicated stuff.

So he was moving up! All of his subordinates said his work was exemplary, so apparently they'd been telling the truth.

“I've actually been named Vice Captain of the Royal Guard.”

So he's gone from Commander of the Special Ops Division to Vice Captain of the Royal Guard, huh! I still don't really get ranks and stuff, but I guess that means he's more important now, right? Hmm... I'll have to ask Rohtas later.

“I see. But this is all quite sudden.” The transfer seemed like a big decision to make on his first day back, so I had to ask.

“Not exactly. I requested this immediately after I returned from the war.”

“Huh?” He stunned us all again.

"I asked His Majesty and my superiors for a transfer before we left on holiday. Whew—I'm glad I put up with going to that banquet after all!" He laughed, flashing his pearly whites at us.

He means the events he actually went to for once after returning from the war, right? Before, he'd always say he was too tired and bow out, but that day he shocked all of us by attending like a good boy. We'd all thought he'd grown up after the war, but he was only trying to angle for a transfer!!

"With the Royal Guard, I won't have to leave Rozhe, or you, nearly as often!" He said it so brightly as I stared at him, dumbfounded, but...

"I already told you, but..."

We moved to the salon for now. Assuming our usual position on the sofa—yep, sitting right up close with Mr. Fisalis—he was going to give us an explanation. *So, you asked for a transfer to the Royal Guard just because you didn't want to leave home!?* Ah, yes. That was the exact kind of person Mr. Fisalis was.

"Seriously, though—our special ops division did a lot of work deep in enemy territory during the war, so there's a chance people remember our faces. I mean, I don't think we'd *actually* make a mistake like that, but warned the higher-ups about the possibility in any case. I also said that even if we hadn't blown our cover, it wouldn't make sense to keep the same undercover team for too long. Once we'd considered the potential risks, we all decided to suggest it might be time for a transfer."

Looking slightly more serious than usual, Mr. Fisalis actually gave us a proper answer for once. Thank goodness. I thought he really did ask the higher-ups just because he didn't want to leave home.

Hm? Wait. 'All of us'? So he's not the only one getting transferred?

"Everyone in the special ops division asked?"

"Yep! We've all been together for a pretty long time. Our request went through smoothly, and His Majesty, the Minister of War, and the Commander of the Chivalric Order all agreed."

I wonder why I immediately imagined the whole division plying their superiors with alcohol during the banquet. They wouldn't do that... right!?

"I see."

"Yes. So everyone in the division has joined the Royal Guard. They made a new section specially for us. Our job will be investigating internal affairs. So instead of facing foreign enemies, we'll just be dealing with ones closer to home."

"So Corydalís and the lady knights will all be transferring too?"

"Yes, we'll all be together. ...We're basically inseparable now..."

"Okay!" I'd been a bit sad that I wouldn't get to see much of his fun subordinates anymore, but I was worrying over nothing! And Mr.

Fisalis might have been complaining, but he was probably happy too. He was smiling, after all.

While I was sitting there, relieved that the former special ops division would be sticking together, Mr. Fisalis spoke up again.

“But we can’t do much investigating publicly, so the official story is that we’re on palace defense. All of what I said is a secret, alright?” *His smile is so dark! Are you blabbing nearly everything to me again, Mr. Fisalis!? Seriously!?*

“W-Wait! Isn’t this super classified?”

“Oh, you should be fine.”

“No, this is too much for me to deal with!”

I mean, I’m glad you trust me so much, but you really don’t have to tell me everything! But while I was already exhausted by all this, he was still cheery.

“So, since we’ll be working from the Royal Palace, we won’t be going on any expeditions or business trips, so I’ll never have to leave you alone again! Oh, I’m so glad I actually did my job like a good boy.”

“This... isn’t it...”

“Hm?”

“N-nothing.”

“But I need to stay the course if I’m going to become Minister of War someday.”

What? He’s actually talking about the future? So he’s already thinking about his next step! Amazing! And Father Fisalis was the Minister of War before he retired, wasn’t he? Now he’s just an unofficial margrave, though.

It seemed that the Fisalis family supported the kingdom in military affairs. The Argenteia family supported it in domestic affairs, for the record. Celosia, Verbena’s father and the current head of the house, was also the prime minister.

“Wouldn’t being the prime minister or a civil official also let you avoid travel?” I asked, thinking he could have just changed careers if he really didn’t want to leave the manor.

“If I was the prime minister or an official, I’d have to suck up to His Majesty. It’d be too much of a pain. I’m much better suited to being Minister of War, since I’d still be important without having to do anything annoying. And to become the Minister of War, I need to move up the ranks in the Chivalric Order. Besides, if I became an official, the only higher rank available would be prime minister. No thanks. I’ll leave that to Celosia,” Mr. Fisalis scoffed.

Isn’t he being a bit too honest?

He continued on. “Let’s leave aside the topic of my transfer. I’m sorry this is happening so soon after we got back from our trip, but we’re going to have to go to a party at the Argenteia manor.” Since

we'd reached a stopping point regarding his transfer and I seemed to have gotten the point, he brought up another topic.

"What?"

Seriously? First a transfer, now a party? We certainly weren't gonna run out of things to talk about tonight.

"I didn't actually want to go this time, but Celosia insisted on it to announce my transfer..." Mr. Fisalis smiled bitterly when I visibly twitched at the mention of attending a party.

I see... We can't do much about it if it'll be for the announcement of his new job transfer. Especially since Celosia himself invited us....

"...We can't turn that down, I guess." I reluctantly agreed.

"Nope! I don't really care about announcing my transfer, but I've decided we'll debut the Viola Sapphires there too!" He was just *waiting* to say that. He was giving me one of his beautiful smiles.

"...Okay." I got even more dejected.

That was the part you really wanted to mention, wasn't it?

He was going on about how he didn't want to go, but in the same breath he added, "It'll be in three weeks. We'll have lots of time to have your gown and jewelry made! I've been in contact with Madame Fleur since we were away, so she should be able to start immediately. She can come by tomorrow. And after that we can go to our usual jeweler to have the sample Viola Sapphires prepared. Rohtas, make it so!" He was happily issuing orders to Rohtas now. *Are you sure you don't want to go? Because you really don't seem that unhappy about it.*

"As you wish."

"Also, tell the mines to send any 'Viola Eyes' they find directly to us."

"Already done."

"Great work!"

Damn, these two work fast.

The next day...

Madame came to see me wearing her usual calm smile. I thought this every time I saw her, but she really wasn't greedy or stuck up at all, despite being the most exclusive seamstress in the capital. Working with her was wonderful.

"The Duke has requested that I make you a dress that will accent sapphires as beautiful as Madam's eyes."

What the heck is he doing, making an embarrassing request like that!? Mr. Fisalis, please just order things like a normal person!

While I was soaking up all that psychic damage and blushing beet red from Mr. Fisalis's mortifying request, Dahlia calmly showed off the gems in question.

"These are the sapphires he mentioned. They're called 'Viola Sapphires,' and will be debuted at the minister's upcoming party."

She's going to end up spreading it further...

Carefully picking up one of the gems, Madam exclaimed, "These are such wonderful sapphires! You almost never see them so large and finely shaped. Just as you'd expect from something named after Madam!"

Rave reviews. I couldn't stand hearing much more of this.

I mean yeah, the sapphires are beautiful. I'm not arguing about that. But naming them after me just ruins any enjoyment I could get out of them. Someone, please stop them already!

Today, we were having a meeting about the design of the gown with the maids. Mimosa was especially tenacious about these kinds of things, after all!

"A blue dress... The first dress I ever made for Madam was blue, wasn't it?"

Ah~ that palace party where I talked about them being optional. That was the one where I made friends with Miss Iris and the others, huh?

"Yes! I absolutely loved that outfit!" Mimosa looked positively spellbound by the thought of it.

It really had been a wonderful dress. It enhanced my flat physique and made it look like I actually had a figure!

"Why not use sapphire blue as an accent this time, rather than the main color?" Stellaria suggested, thinking. She must have been practically constructing the whole dress in her head.

"Good idea, Miss Ria! Ah, sorry!" Poor Mimosa just couldn't stop being overly polite to the junior she admired so much. She cringed when both Dahlia and Stellaria herself glared at her.

"Madam prefers simple dresses, and since that's such a fresh viewpoint, I've been getting many requests for dresses just like the Duchess's lately," Madame told us, laughing.

"Showy dresses—flowy, frilly things with tons of lace—have been in fashion for quite some time after, all."

Just what you'd expect from a former palace lady-in-waiting. Stellaria knows all about high society's trends.

"The complete opposite of Madam's preferences, huh~" Mimosa continued, looking at me. I nodded in agreement.

"Oh, *everyone* is paying attention to Madam's fashion choices these days."

I tried to shake my head no at Stellaria this time, but...

"Clean, simple dresses are certainly in fashion now," Madame told me as she sketched a dress design onto some paper. I was amazed by how she could draw and talk at the same time.

I didn't really like big fancy dresses anyway, so putting aside all this talk about my personal fashion choices, I was actually pretty happy that simple was in.

“But I always want to dress this way, no matter what’s fashionable.”

“Oh my! Ohohoho!”

She was laughing at me. Why?

After everyone but me got into a discussion about it, it was decided that the dress would be mostly white with sapphire blue accents. For the actual design, they decided the simpler the better, of course.

“The bodice will be a bit lower-cut, but I assure you it’s necessary to show off your necklace, Madam.”

“The skirt will have lots of draping, accented with blue flowers. Let’s go with a big, cute ribbon in the back~!”

“I’ll do my best to bring out all of Madam’s charm points.”

Madame skillfully drew up her design blueprint as Mimosa and Stellaria advised. Once the design was finished, she left—only to be immediately replaced by the jeweler! He was even happier than Madame had been.

“It’s such an honor that you’d allow me to work with these valuable sapphires, especially since they haven’t even been shown to the general public yet!” he said before taking the gems from Dahlia. “These are... Oh, what fine gems! If they’re named after Madam, surely the demand will be unprecedented!”

Giving the gemstones a much more detailed inspection than Madame had, the jeweler sighed, spellbound.

“There are plans to seek out even finer sapphires,” Dahlia announced with a straight face. *Oh no no, you can’t say that when we haven’t actually dug any up yet!*

“Better quality than even these? I’ll look forward to the day I get to see something like that!” His eyes widened happily.

That’s all still in progress! Dahlia, you shouldn’t get his hopes up like that!

“Because of that, we may request some changes to your designs in the future.”

“I’ll be happy to accept them!”

An immediate okay from the jeweler on that. Really?

The jewelry was to be made to match the dress’s design rather than the other way around. Or rather, this time the jewelry itself would be the focal point.

When he heard that, the owner cried, “This is a serious responsibility, then! I’ll pour my entire heart and soul into making them!” and very carefully wrapped the sapphires up before putting them in his bag and leaving in high spirits.

I still hated going out in public, but I couldn’t say no anymore, so I just had to suck it up and do my best. *It was specifically optional back*

when we first got married... I stared off into the distance and tried to think of something else.

◆◆◆Idle Asides, No. 2, Cercis's Perspective — A Short Time◆◆◆

For a while after our belated honeymoon, I was quite busy with transferring squads and managing our new jobs, but I headed home earlier than usual one day when I found myself with a bit of extra time.

Since it was still a while until dinner, I was thinking about going for a walk with Viola around the garden, but...

"Huh? Viola's not here?"

"She is here, but I am saying that Madam is out in the gardens."

Today, stick-in-the-mud Rohtas was the only one waiting for me. My adorable Viola wasn't there! When I looked around for her, I was told she was outside. I was so disappointed to miss out on her usual warm welcome.

"Where exactly is she?"

"Her personal garden."

"Her what?" *She has a personal garden? Whatever—I'll just have to go to her, then.*

"Take me there."

"Will you change—"

"I can change later."

Deciding to change out of my uniform later, I followed Rohtas out onto the manor grounds. He led me to a less-traveled corner of the garden.

"Hey, is Viola really—" Just as I was about to ask if she was actually there...

"Where should I plant this andreanum?"

"Let's see. How about here?"

"Alright. Ah, the flowers I got from Mr. Fisalis are blooming beautifully again!"

"It's because you take such good care of them, Madam!"

"Ehehe, really? You're embarrassing me."

"I'll leave the andreanums here."

"Okaaay!"

I began to hear cheery voices. It was Viola, Bellis, Mimosa, and Stellaria. They were all watching Bellis plant those "andreanums." I decided to sneak up behind Viola and surprise her a little.

"Viola! What are you doing?"

“GYAAAAAH~! IT’S FINALLY COME FOR ME—Wait, Mr. Fialis!?”

“Don’t look at me like I’m a ghost or something!”

I thought they’d all had their attention on Bellis, but I now saw that it was Viola herself holding the spade and working in the soil. When I jumped out at her, she fell backwards onto the ground in shock. How adorable!

I stepped closer, pulling her back to her feet. “What are you doing out here?” I asked again.

“I was planting the andreanums you bought for me in Le Pied,” she explained, pointing to the tray that Bellis was holding. It held the flower bulbs I’d bought for her as souvenirs lined up neatly on it. *Oh, those ones with the heart-shaped leaves. So they’re called andreanums, huh?*

“So you’re... watching Bellis plant them?” I asked, despite staring at the spade in her hand.

“Hm? No, I’m planting them myself.” She tilted her head.

“What? You? Huh!?”

“That’s right! This entire corner is for my personal use! Ah, yeah—this is where I planted the bulbs you got me before you went off to war. Look, they’re blooming nicely right now!” She pulled my hand, leading me over to the fully bloomed flowers. *Oh yeah, those are the ones I bought her on our date, aren’t they?*

In addition to how all the flowers were blooming so beautifully, I could see from the complete lack of weeds around them that they were well taken care of. The thought of Viola having so much fun with her personal garden brought a smile to my face.

“They’ve bloomed a couple of times now!”

“They’re beautiful. And you’re the one who takes care of them?”

“Yep! But I had to leave it to Bellis while we were away. Aren’t they lovely?”

“Very.”

When she smiled up at me, I smiled back. My heart was warmed by the realization that she was growing the flowers *I* bought for her. It healed all my irritation over how busy I’d been lately.

Looking at me, Viola suddenly clapped her hands, scoop and all. “I have an idea! How about you plant them with us, since you’re here?”

“Huh? Me?”

“Yes, you! Playing in the dirt is really fun, you know?”

“Hmm, but I’ve never done it before...”

“That’s okay! Bellis is here, too!”

She handed me the spade. Seeing her smiling like she always did made me feel like maybe I could try something new once in a while.

And since I'm in my uniform, it doesn't matter if it gets dirty.

"Alright! What should I do first?" Handing my uniform jacket to Rohtas, I rolled up my sleeves and looked up at Viola for directions.

"Plant this right here!"

She crouched down beside me and handed over a seedling, so I dug a hole and planted it where she pointed. We just kept repeating that set of actions over and over, with me planting wherever she wanted.

"Won't this throw off the color scheme?"

"You think? Where would you suggest we plant it, then?"

We kept going, discussing placement as we went, sometimes asking Bellis for advice.

"Hmm... This color is similar to this one, so wouldn't it look nice as a subtle color shift?"

"Oh, that's a great idea!"

"Hahaha...!"

"What's wrong, Mr. Fisalis? Is playing in the garden so fun it's making you laugh? I mean, it is really fun."

"No, it's just that you look like you're having a lot of fun. Do you like this kind of thing?"

"I love it!"

Viola was always bright and cheerful, but the way she was getting excited today made her seem her actual age, rather than the far more mature vibe she usually gave off.

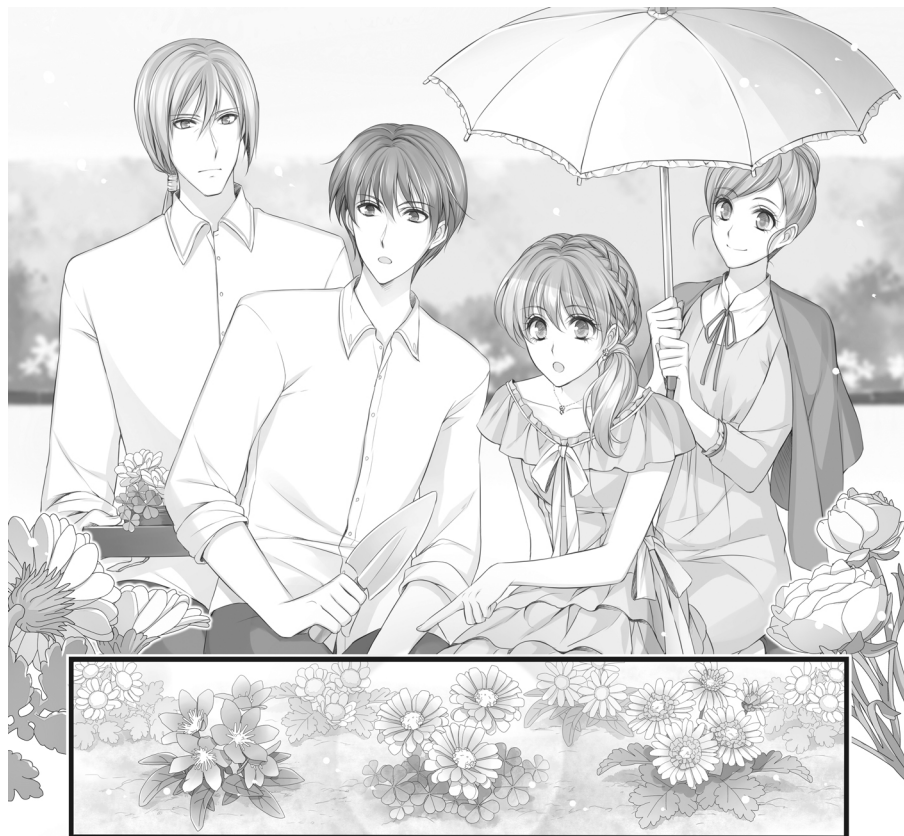
Smiling together, we planted flowers in our nice garden. I was able to talk and laugh with a more natural, carefree Viola than usual. *This is nice.*

Gardening might be kind of fun! Thinking back, Mother always loved planting flowers like this. That must be why she and Viola got along so well. Dahlia was always getting after her, too, saying she'd get a tan. I could just imagine Viola's maids saying the same thing.

And just as I thought that...

"Geez, Madam! I told you not to move out from under the parasol!"

Look, Mimosa's getting angry!



8 — Back to the Usual

“I’ll see you later. I don’t think I’ll be home too late tonight.”

“See you! I should be back around the same time as Cercis.”

“Bye, Vi! Be sure to take it easy, alright!”

“Have a good day!”

I saw Mr. Fisalis and my in-laws off from the entrance, with all the servants in attendance too. Mr. Fisalis was going to work, Father Fisalis had been summoned by His Majesty The King, and Mother Fisalis had been invited for tea by the Queen. They all had different ultimate destinations, but they were all three headed to the palace together. I was staying home, of course. I mean, yeah, that was normal, but I was happy.

Since I was in such a good mood, I walked them all the way to the carriage. After watching them ride off through the manor gates together...

“Fufufu~ What am I gonna do today?” I broke out into a big grin. My in-laws weren’t around for the first time in a while, so I could finally do whatever I wanted! It’d be a waste to just spend this time loafing around. I’ve gotta stay active!

“Madam, you look quite pleased,” Rohtas said with a wry smile.

“Of course I am—no one’s home! I can eat lunch with everybody in the servants’ dining room! I can even clean and do laundry without sneaking around. I couldn’t possibly just do *nothing*! Ah, I’m gonna put on my uniform right now!” I skipped off excitedly.

“Aren’t you going to stop her?”

“Madam needs a break sometimes.”

Both Rohtas and Dahlia must have given up, since they didn’t even try to stop me.

I pulled my favorite uniform out of the depths of my closet. “Ahh, this is the best. I don’t have to worry about getting it dirty, and it’s easy to move in!” I was even wearing an apron today, so I could really go as hard as I liked. No matter how many times I was told it was fine to get my regular clothes dirty, I still worried whenever I wore them.

As I twirled in front of my mirror, Stellaria giggled. “You look quite cute in it, though. Now, let me do your hair,” she said, starting to braid a few strands together. Now, the plain old maid look was ready☆

“I think I’m gonna start with laundry! I haven’t been able to do it

very often, since it's got the biggest risk of being caught. I'm gonna flap those sheets as hard as I can today!" Since Father and Mother Fisalis could be lurking anywhere, I'd stuck to just playing in my garden lately... But if I didn't do the other chores, I'd forget all those maid skills I'd managed to learn. That'd be a big waste!

"One, two—!"

After joining the maids in washing the sheets, we flapped them up and down all together before we hung them out to dry. *Get lots of air and become fluffy and soft! Bring on the comfiness~! My bed, Mr. Fisalis's bed, the cottage bed, come one, come all—I'll fluff 'em all up!*

Once I'd finished the laundry with no problems at all, I joined the cleaning team in tidying up the manor. I left the expensive decorations to the pros, though. I'm not letting myself touch them—not after last time.

Since we were out of camellias for my cleaning concoction, I went out to the gardens to replenish my supply. Yes, the cleaning secret I brought from my family home. After I'd shown everyone how to clean with the camellia skins, the whole manor had picked it up.

Stellaria and Dahlia both looked busy, so I went out to the camellia tree without bothering them. I'd only be running out to grab the plants quickly, so I didn't think I'd be gone long. And I was very familiar with the gardens, so I should be okay alone.

Or so I thought.

I'd made it to the tree, but unfortunately, there weren't any fruits that I could easily reach today. I jumped up, trying to grab the lowest one, but I kept barely missing it.

"Grr. I can't get it by jumping. ...Since no one is looking, I'll just climb up there." The trunk was thick and the branches sturdy, so it should bear my weight easily.

Giving a final check to make sure no one was around, I started climbing the tree.

"Okay, got some... Whoa!?" I picked a bunch of the camellias that were within arms reach, put them in my pockets, and was about to try climbing down when my foot slipped off one of the lower branches.

I scrambled to steady myself, but I lost my balance and slammed onto the ground, landing on my back.

"OUCH! Ow, ow, owwww..." I laid there in anguish. Luckily, the grass had cushioned my fall a bit, but the impact knocked the breath right out of me. I just lay there groaning for a bit, only to hear Stellaria's voice as she ran over.

"Madam! So you *were* out here! We were all looking for you, since you vanished so suddenly... Is something the matter?"

I'm saved. But I'm *definitely* in for it.

"Stellaria~! I just kinda fell out of the tree. Is my spine still in my

body? My vertebrae aren't scattered all around the garden, are they?"

"Huh? You're all in one piece. But you fell *from a tree*?"

"I was just grabbing some camellia fruits, but my foot slipped. Teehee☆" *My spine is okay. Thank goodness!* I tried to laugh it all off, but it didn't go over well.

"Don't 'teehee☆' me!! Bellis, carry her."

"Right."

Bellis emerged from behind Stellaria, both of them glaring up a storm. He picked me up and carried me back to the main building. *Thanks!*

While I changed out of my dirty uniform into my normal clothes, Dahlia had a look at my back. She was nearly ready to call a doctor, but since it wasn't hurting anymore, I managed to convince her not to do that by promising to be good for the rest of the day.

"Anyway. Please don't go wandering off on your own without telling anyone. Do you know how worried we were?" Rohtas read me the riot act in the salon.

"I'm sorry. Since everyone looked so busy, I thought I could climb up that usual camellia tree on my own."

"Even if you could."

"I won't do it again. I'm sorry."

"What am I going to tell the Master..." He shook his head, holding his temples.

What? You're gonna tell Mr. Fisalis!? "No, don't tell him! He'll kick up a big fuss... *Cough*, I mean, he'd be so worried. And I'm not hurt, so it's not really a big deal. I promise I'll never wander off without telling anyone ever again, so please? PLEASE?" I begged. If Mr. Fisalis found out I fell out of a tree, he'd probably ban me from ever going to the garden again.

"But—"

"And I don't want the rest of you to get in trouble because of me. Please?" I laid it on even thicker once he started to falter. "It was my fault, so I should be the only one who gets punished. I'd feel horrible if the servants got in trouble for not supervising me. Let's just sweep it under the rug."

Rohtas gave a big sigh and smiled bitterly at my frantic begging. "Alright. I don't think I could bear to tell him you fell out of a tree, after all. So—you promise to tell someone before you go anywhere from now on?"

"Of course!" I gave him a salute.

I ate lunch in the servants' dining room. It really was fun to eat with a big group of people again! I'd gotten used to eating with Mr. Fisalis and enjoying(?) a quiet chat, but I was really in my element here.

After lunch, I ended up feeling really bored, since I'd gone and promised to be good the rest of the day. As that left me with nothing to do, I sat snugly on the sofa and watched the maids work. It seemed like they were using the camellias I had picked. *I'm glad they didn't go to waste.*

While I continued my observation of the maids, Stellaria giggled at me, asking, "Are you really that bored, Madam?"

I looked over, suddenly smelling something wonderful, only to see Stellaria in the middle of making a pot of tea. She skillfully measured the tea leaves and put them in the pot before pouring in the hot water and covering it with a tea cozy. I was entranced by her graceful movements.

Now that I think about it, all of the maids here are great at making tea. No matter who does it, the tea always comes out perfectly delicious. I've been forced... I mean, taught tea etiquette, but I've never learned how to make it like that. Oh! Why don't I ask them to teach me, since I've got this chance? I could be the one making tea for Mr. Fisalis while he relaxes on his days off. Wow, that really sounds happily domestic! Wouldn't that be great? I've gotta learn how! It's a high-power servant skill, after all!

"I wanna learn how to make tea. Then I could make Mr. Fisalis a delicious pot on my own," I told Dahlia, striking while the iron was hot.

"Oh my—heheheh. That's true. It would be good to learn for yourself." Though she initially looked sort of shocked, she almost immediately agreed. She was smiling for once. *Did I say something funny?*

Moving to the servants' dining room, my tea lessons started. Since it was right beside the kitchens, we could get tea leaves and hot water quickly. We chose a few different types of tea leaves, and the right teapot for each type.

First, I had Professor Dahlia give me an example run.

"Different types of tea leaves need to steep for different lengths of time. Once you memorize those, you'll always make a good pot. For milk tea, steeping it a bit longer will make it stronger and more tasty," she explained, her hands never stopping as she did so. The scent coming from the pot was so wonderful.

First, I tried it straight. After enjoying the beautiful color, I appreciated the scent. *Oooh, my tea etiquette is already perfect! Never forget your manners, right, Dahlia?* She nodded in satisfaction at my movements. *You have to focus your whole body right down to your fingertips, but it's easy once you get used to it. I won't mess up anymore!*

I tried it out myself next, mimicking her example. I warmed the pot, measured the leaves, and poured the hot water in the moment it came to a boil. After measuring the time with an hourglass, I poured it

into the cup at the precise moment it was perfectly done. I could do it exactly how she told me~! All that's left is finding out if it's good or not.

The color was lovely, and so was the scent. I timidly set it in front of Dahlia. *I hope it's okay... I'm so nervous!* I watched her take a sip with her perfect movements.

"It's very well brewed. Delicious."

"Really? Yay!"

"If you keep practicing, you'll make an even better pot. You passed your first test with flying colors." *I got a smile and Dahlia's seal of approval! I did it, I've acquired another maid skill!*

"Can I keep practicing?"

"Yes."

Since Dahlia had given me the okay, I tried brewing all the other types of tea too. And since it was there, I had the servants who came in on break drink it. I got a little carried away during the snack break, since it was so well-received—that I just made more and more.

"Madammm, we've had way too much already!"

The complaints from the servants were all part of the fun!

9 — Learning Something New

It had been raining since morning. It had been raining a lot lately, in fact. *We've hit the year's second rainy season, huh? So depressing.*

Once the curtains were opened and I saw the gray sky through the window, my mood just dropped like a stone. And the days when I could hear it pouring outside made me just want to pull my blanket over my head and go back to sleep. I would've just faked sick and played hooky, but since that might start a riot (a certain someone would start screaming about sickness, doctors, and medicine if I did!), I got up like a good girl so I wouldn't bother anyone.

...I had to praise myself for this, to raise my spirits, because no one else would.

Dahlia gave me a wry smile when I was acting unusually sluggish. "Good morning, Madam. Unfortunately, it's raining today," she said, completely seeing through me.

"Rain, huh..." I slowly got out of bed and headed to the dresser where Stellaria was waiting. If I didn't get ready now, I'd be late for breakfast. And if I was, a certain someone would...

"Oh, don't look so glum. Let's put you in something brightly colored today!" said Stellaria, bringing an orange gown out from my dressing room. It was knee-length with an elegant design that still came off as cute. It was one of my favorites, because it was the same length as my uniform and easy to move in. It did actually help my mood a little bit. Having my hair put into two loose braids, my wifely style was complete. After that, I went to the dining room at the usual time, and had my usual breakfast with Mr. Fisalis. It was fine—*someone* didn't fuss—so the Fisalis manor was running exactly as normal.

Once we finished breakfast, I saw him off at the entrance. Now that I thought about it, his uniform had changed. Not the design, just the color. He wore a navy blue jacket back when he was in the Special Ops division, but now it was dark red for the Royal Guard—just like Celosia told me back at the departure ceremony.

He looked beautiful in his brand new uniform. Dark red suited him! People with great figures had it easy. They could wear whatever they wanted and look good in all of it.

After Mr. Fisalis left, I took a breath. Fretting about what I was going to do today would be a waste of energy. I turned around,

wondering if I could make it back to my room before Rohtas came back inside from seeing him off.

“Madam.”

EEK! All Rohtas did was call for me, but my shoulders twitched. *Here comes the lesson invite!* “Y-Yeeees. Lessons, right? Dancing, right? I’ll do my best again today~! Ahahahaha~” I said, turning around and answering with a twitching smile.

A Flür nursery rhyme about a calf being sold at the market kept running through my head, because I felt just like that little calf.

It must have been easy to see how little I wanted to do any of this. “You don’t need to strain yourself...” he said, chuckling.

It’s because you’re a demon. You don’t know mercy. But you did increase my ‘I can kinda technically dance’ skills to a level where people praise me, so I’m super grateful!!

“It’s fine! I’ll do my best!” I gripped my hands into fists to try to psyche myself up. Go, me!

“Heheheh. Then how about we try something different today?” he offered, laughing at my attempts to be brave.

“Something different? Like walking?” The incident at Le Pied ran through my mind as I asked.

“No. Martial arts.” Smiling brightly, Rohtas suggested something I never expected.

Martial arts? Why? “Martial arts is that stuff where you throw people, or knock them down, or hit them, right?”

“You *are* quite aggressive.”

He was quick to retort, but that was what he was talking about, right? The same kind of thing that Mr. Fisalis used on those thugs. What did he want me to learn that for?

I stared blankly, not knowing what he was getting at, only to get a forced smile in return. “There are attacks involved, but defense is the most important thing. Remember the incident back in Le Pied.”

“Um, the one where bad men almost carried me off?”

“Yes,” he said, nodding seriously.

So, the time when I was nearly kidnapped by some not-so-nice guys. Back then, Mr. Fisalis acted like a proper knight and defeated the thugs with martial arts and sword skills. *He was so cool.*

“I’m not talking about how cool Master may or may not be.”

Whoops, he read my mind!

...Er, maybe it was obvious.

Rohtas adjusted his falling glasses. “If Master hadn’t been there, you wouldn’t have been able to do anything against them, would you?”

“Uum...” *Erk.* He was right. *Really* right. I cringed.

“Do you know what would happen if that were to occur?”

“I’d cause a whole lot of trouble for a lot of people—”

“No,” he interrupted me as I timidly replied. “Master, the former Duke and Duchess, and all of us here would be *worried* sick. No, not just worried. We would go berserk,” he said, emphasizing his words.

All of our high-specced servants banding together with Mr. Fisalis at the helm... The criminals would never see the light of day again. Or rather... there would be nothing left of them. Uwah. That’s terrifying!! Thinking of what would happen, I started to tremble. “I wouldn’t want that!”

“Of course you wouldn’t.” He smiled at how quickly I caught on. I must’ve been right on the money. “It would be the same in Rozhe. You may be safe with Master or the guards, but if you were to somehow find yourself alone, you would need to protect yourself,” he explained kindly.

I see, I see. That’s why I would need to learn martial arts, I thought, impressed. “Huh. Ah, but I won’t be going out much—” I tried to correct him, but...

“You will have more opportunities.”

“—Ah, yeah, you’re right.” I failed.

I surrendered to his big smile. *He’s so intimidating.*

After I honestly(?) agreed, he looked satisfied and continued, “It’s important to be prepared for any possible occurrence. I’ve run out of things to teach you about dance, so next, how about we focus on teaching you some self-defense?” *Grin.*

...He was pushing everything through with a smile today. I couldn’t go against him.

“Y-You’re right. Might be fun to change things up?”

“If you learn martial arts, you’ll be able to immediately land safely without any serious injuries if you fall out of another tree.”

“That’d be great!” I said, suddenly getting into it.

Rohtas was never going to let me forget that. “We’ll have you learn the basics with a suitable maid.”

“A maid will be teaching me?” I smiled as soon as I heard he wouldn’t be my instructor. A maid wouldn’t be as much of a demon as him!

“Yes. For a beginner such as you, Stellaria would be most appropriate. And since this is Bellis’s realm of expertise, he can coach,” he said, moving to call for my new teachers almost as soon as he thought of them.

Bellis, huh? He’s well built and strong, so he really does look like he’d be good at all this stuff! “Okaaaay. Ah, but are you not good at them or something?” I asked, even though I was pretty sure Rohtas couldn’t be bad at anything.

“No. I am somewhat knowledgeable about hand-to-hand combat,

but I'm more of a swordsman."

"Ah. Swords. They totally suit you!" I imagined him straightening his back and standing at the ready with his blade. How cool!

We went straight to the salon to start practicing. All of the sofas and tables were pushed up to the walls out of the way. There were also two or three layers of long shag carpeting covering the marble floors so no one would get hurt if they fell to the ground. We were ready!

"First off. Don't try to throw someone using your own strength. Use the momentum of your attacker to do it."

"Got it, Teach!"

Practice started with a lecture. Bellis did the explanations instead of Rohtas. Since I had no need for any of this stuff back at my family home (no way we would've been targeted☆), we were really starting from step one.

Next was a demonstration. Bellis attacked Stellaria.

"Hiya!" With a gallant cry, she grabbed his hand as he lunged at her. The small woman used her size to get in close to Bellis's chest. By sinking her body down skillfully and standing back up, she performed a fantastic shoulder throw. Bellis's heavy body flew through the air.

"Ah—!" Of course, he performed a splendid controlled fall and was completely unharmed. After landing perfectly, he brushed the dust off himself as he stood back up.

"Woaaaaahhhhh!" I said, watching on in astonishment. Stellaria made it look so easy, but would I be able to do the same?

"Professor Bellis! I have a question!"

"...What is it?"

"What do you do when you're attacked from behind?"

"We'll teach you how to deal with that. We'll also not be only focusing on martial arts, but how to use concealed weapons, so you can fight back with either."

"Concealed weapons!!"

He mentioned it so nonchalantly, but *concealed weapons*!

"All of the servants in the manor carry concealed weapons, of course."

"I didn't know!!" Seriously? It was kind of (no, *more* than kind of) a shock to hear.

"The reason that the uniform skirts here are longer than those of other houses is because we all carry weapons strapped to our thighs," Stellaria added onto Bellis's explanation.

Oh, so our uniforms are longer than usual, huh! I had no idea.

"I didn't know that. That's kinda sexy!"

"That shouldn't be what you get out of it, but... Also, all of the maids carry hidden knives."

“Woaaaaah!” *Everyone is always so bright and having fun doing their jobs, but they’re all packing heat! If anything happened, they could flip their skirt up and whip out their knives...! Kyaaa~! That’s so cool!*

...Sorry, getting a bit excited.

No, really, though. I was nothing but shocked at all this new information.

“We’re all trained in martial arts and swordsmanship to a master’s level, so we’ll always be able to protect you from any enemies. Don’t worry!” Stellaria was smiling cutely, but the words coming out of her mouth were so super brave and manly. *I’m gonna fall in love! And seriously, how overpowered are all of the duchy’s servants...*

“Let’s get to practice. We’ll start with the basic methods of falling —”

That said, I started learning martial arts from the very beginning with Stellaria, under Coach Bellis. *I wonder if I’ll ever be able to throw him like that?*

10 — That Taught Me Something

“Hiyah~!”

“Whoops...”

With my courageous(?) cry, Cartham was flung through the air. He was remarkably calm for someone who just got tossed, spinning around once as he landed before hopping back up like it was nothing.

“...Damn, and that was my best throw...”

“Hahaha!”

While I was bent over wheezing, he stood with his usual composed smile. *Grr...*

Thanks to Bellis and Stellaria’s special training, I’d finally managed to get to the point where I could successfully throw someone who attacked me from the front. It had taken me the whole day, though...

They thought it would be good for me to be able to toss a full-grown man, but it’d be impossible for me to do it to Bellis right now, since he’s so bulky—so they summoned Cartham for the job instead. Why did they want me to learn this? Because I was most likely to be attacked by a man. And if I could toss men, throwing a much lighter woman would be a breeze anyway. Cartham was chosen because he was fairly average-sized, but he was still hard to throw because of his muscles.

“I was only able to be so calm because I knew it was Madam throwing me... an untrained person might have been hurt. You’ve done wonderfully on your first day. Your toss was *magnifique!*”

Cartham praised me with his sweet words, but I couldn’t find it in me to be happy about it when he was completely unfazed by it.

Bellis noticed the disappointment on my face, saying, “An ordinary noble boy would probably have fainted.”

R-Really? Really really? If both of them say it, I might just have to believe it!

But martial arts took more energy than dancing, so I was pretty exhausted. I’d been told it’d just be so easy, catching someone coming at me and throwing them away. But that was a lie. I’d been totally fooled, and now I was totally pooped. *Hmm, should I just have sucked it up and danced...?*

The only thing that made this easier than dancing was the lack of mental stress. With martial arts, all I had to do was throw and practice

falling. It might actually have been easier, overall, since I didn't have to plaster a smile on my face the whole time.

"Hehehe~! Since you both praised me, could it be that I'm actually pretty good?" I was nowhere near the master-class maids' level, but I was still feeling a bit smug, overestimating myself because I got a bit of praise.

"You're good *for a beginner*. Dealing with someone coming at you straight-on is the most basic of basics. In a real situation, you'll actually see more people coming from the back or sides."

"Ah."

Grr, Bellis! Just when I was thinking he was saying all this nice stuff about me, he has to go and add something like that! So, I was just learning the most basic of basics, huh...

"You can't learn everything in one day, so let's just get you used to doing this bit by bit!" Stellaria tried to cheer me up when she saw me staring off into the distance, but as you'd expect from one of our servants, she didn't actually say we were going to *stop* for now. I knew from experience that they'd never be satisfied with just teaching me the basics. They'd just say I should move on to practical use, and once I'd gotten that down, mastering it.

Ahh~ Looks like we're gonna be going for a while yet. I just wanna scream, "You don't have to keep up the professionalism here, too!"

But no, I was too chicken to say that out loud. And I could just see them wheedling me back into it if I tried to resist. "...I think I can manage bit by bit, at least..." *That was all I could get myself to say—don't blame me!*

After that, the Spa Squad treated me to a healing massage until Mr. Fisalis got home. But since I'd worked a lot of muscles I'd never used before, there was no way I'd be able to avoid the aches and pains afterwards. *Oww.*

The next day wasn't rainy. I mean, it was still miserably cloudy, but that was better than rain.

Since I was still sore from martial arts practice the day before, it would've been absolute torture to be subjected to *more physical exercise*.

For the moment, I decided to just be happy it wasn't raining. After seeing Mr. Fisalis off as usual, I considered what to do for the day as I sipped my tea in the salon.

"Since I couldn't change the flowers yesterday, I might start with that. ...I really, REALLY do not want to move much."

"Oh, Madam. Changing the flowers would be lovely~! It'll cheer you right up, too. Bellis should be in the greenhouse today."

"For now, at least. He spent all yesterday teaching me martial arts."

“Yep...”

When I looked over at Mimosa, who was just keeping me company since she wasn't working, I thought of the flowers and decided what I was going to do. Then, while she and I were heading to the greenhouse with *Stellaria*, we ran into Rohtas.

“Oh, Rohtas. What's that you've got?”

He was carrying a super-thick, super-fancy book in his arms. It was navy blue, with the title written on the cover and spine in gold, but since I only got a glimpse and it was in a really ornate script, I didn't catch what it said. I figured just asking would be faster than trying to read it.

“This is the brand-new noble's almanac. It just arrived from the palace, so I was bringing it to the library,” he said, showing me.

The noble's almanac was a book listing all of the court ranks, names, positions, and blood relations of the aristocracy in Flür. They were valuable books, and only the families of dukes and marquises actually received a copy. If someone with the rank of count or lower wanted to read it, they'd have to go to the royal library.

Due to various circumstances (that were certainly not because I wasn't interested!), this was the first time I'd ever seen one. My father told me the almanacs were boring since they were all text, no pictures. *The Fialis family is highly ranked enough to get their own copy, huh?*

“It's so thick! Looks heavy.” I was amazed because the book was thicker than the distance between the tips of my thumb and middle finger stretched as far apart as possible.

“This year, they've included portraits of the heads of each house, so that ‘fattened’ the book up, it seems,” Rohtas explained with a faint smile.

Father's prayers have been answered, huh? “It was just text up until now, right?”

“Yes. There were complaints about not being able to match names to faces, so they've added the portraits with the intention of stopping scoundrels from disguising themselves as nobles.”

So, my father wasn't the only one who was unhappy with the lack of pictures. But never mind that. Very rarely, swindlers tried to pass themselves off as nobles who only occasionally came to the capital or weren't involved in high society. *They're right that having portraits too may help! Good job, editors!*

“Huh, so there are portraits now. I kinda want to see.”

If it included all of the nobles in the kingdom, it'd definitely have Mr. Fialis's portrait. I'd never cared about the almanac before (there, I said it!) since it didn't have anything I wanted to look at, but now I wanted to see how they'd painted my sparkingly beautiful husband.

“Oh, by all means. The portraits were drawn by the most skilled

artist in the kingdom, so that alone is worth a look. I'll carry it to the library; you can read it there."

I mean, I'm glad he agreed so quickly, but... is it me, or was he smirking just now?

"What's wrong, Madam?"

"Oh, nothing! Let's go!" I'd been staring at Rohtas's face, but all I could see now was his usual smile. *Must've been my imagination.*

"Wow! Mr. Fisalis looks so cool! This artist really is talented! They've managed to capture his sparkle so perfectly!"

"The former duke also looks quite handsome."

"Ah, they beautified my father!?"

"No, no, they didn't."

Mimosa and Stellaria gave me a forced smile.

The three of us were in the library, having a blast looking through the noble's almanac.

The Fisalis family was founded by the younger brother of Flür's first king, who became his retainer, and many princesses had been married off into the family, it had been the source of many queens, and blah blah blah... Basically, they were really close to royalty. That was why they were so prestigious.

Which meant that the Fisalis family got top billing in the almanac and Mr. Fisalis's portrait as the current head was the very first page. And they did a great job of capturing his stunning visage! The artist they picked really was great—it was kind of a waste that all these gorgeous paintings were in an almanac of all things. I could just imagine young ladies cutting pictures out and hanging them on their walls!

...I had to stress how great it was.

Huh, me? I wouldn't hang it up. I've got enough with the real thing around all the time.

"So, this is what Miss Iris' father looks like~!"

"Marquis Sanguinneah?"

"She looks so much like her father. Especially around the eyes."

Etc, etc. We kept flipping through the pages, squealing excitedly.

"Just from seeing the portraits of Mr. Fisalis and my father, they're drawn so close to reality."

"Yes. The artist is known for drawing exactly what they see, but still making it attractive. They're the number one artist in Rozhe, and in great demand. Her Majesty summoned them a few days ago to do her own portrait."

I see. So they can capture how beautiful people really look, and make normal people look situationally attractive. And my father was one of the latter to be blessed.

“Just as you’d expect from Stellaria! You know everything, from high society trends to what goes on in the palace!” I was always amazed by how well-informed she was.

“Leave all the Rozhe info to me! I can answer any question you ask!”

Thanks to the portraits, we managed to get through the entire almanac without getting bored, and I got to put nobles’ faces and names together. Illustrated almanacs are the best!

11 — You Never Stop Learning

As expected, the rain, clouds, storms, and all that sort of miserable weather continued in Rozhe. And with that miserable weather came martial arts training and more studies to torture my brain.

On the martial arts side, things had progressed. I was using WEAPONS! Concealed ones, at that.

“You’re good with blades, right, Rohtas?”

“Yes. But ordinary swords like Master uses rather than concealed weapons. I am proficient with daggers as well, but Bellis and Cartham are better than I am.”

“Ah~ I totally get that~!”

Bellis could probably make even a wooden spade into a weapon. Would Cartham throw kitchen knives? I smiled to myself as I replaced the daggers in my mental image with gardening and cooking tools.

“In your case, Madam, you should stick to daggers, since you’re only using them in self-defense. And I believe Dahlia would be best to teach you defensive dagger techniques. She can teach you from a woman’s perspective, after all,” Rohtas said, handing me my practice dagger. It was made of wood, and the tip was rounded, so no one would be injured. *What a relief!*

“Yeah. But I feel like I could totally get to knight level by learning from you guys.”

“You really don’t need to do that.”

“Okay.”

And with that, I started learning defensive dagger technique from Dahlia. That would be my main weapon, but...

“You won’t always be able to pull out a concealed weapon. That’s when you use whatever’s within reach,” she told me, showing me how to defend myself with cutlery like forks and knives, and even hair clips.

I’m learning how to make anything I touch into a weapon. Yep—that means I could use a wonderful daily-use item like a broom as a weapon☆

And dagger techniques weren’t all that I started picking up. She also taught me how to get away if I really did get grabbed. Because you couldn’t really use martial arts if you were drugged or something, right? And it’s not like I could build up a resistance to poisons overnight. *My family never needed to worry about any of this, sorry!*

But getting tied up with rope while you’re knocked out is the

standard pattern. Women and children usually end up restrained before they're taken away, after all. *Ah, I mean—I dunno if it actually happens in real life, since I've never been in that much danger, but I've read about it in books. Rohtas said the same thing, too.* I didn't get the feeling I could refuse just because I thought something that scary would never happen to me... so I agreed like a wuss.

And so, I learned how to escape from ropes.

But what if I did get kidnapped and locked up—I ended up in some jail cell before I knew it, but I could see the lock? Yep, you guessed it: they taught me lockpicking too.

I was getting the chance to practice all kinds of skills on top of martial arts and knifeplay. Although it was less “practice” and more “getting the skill beaten into me.”

I understood the practicality of all this, but...

“Ready, set, go!!”

“Hyaaaaaaaah~~~!”

I was dashing through the halls dressed in a fancy gown. And of course, I was wearing *much* higher heels than usual. What purpose could having me sprint full-speed through the C-shaped second floor of the Fisalis manor possibly serve?

“This is amazing. Self-defense is so hard,” I mumbled, fiddling with a lock. I was fighting with it while a maid who was good at lockpicking gave me instructions. And I was picking it with a hairpin, of course. Train as if you're in a state of emergency! But lockpicking was actually pretty fun, so I was kinda getting into it. I might just start doing it in my spare time instead of puzzles.



“It would be terrible if anything happened to you, Madam. But training today will protect you tomorrow, so do your best!” the maid said, trying to cheer me up as I complained.

“...I was told I’d be a show wife. I was told I could just stay home.”

The “show wife” bit might’ve been repealed after we’d changed the terms of our contract, but the other ones should still be in effect.

Mr. Fisalis, what happened to our agreement?

“Is something the matter?”

“Oh, nothing~! I’ll work hard practicing both knifeplay and martial arts! Ah, that’s right—I kinda wish I could see Rohtas swinging a sword,” I said, thinking about how cool he’d probably look.

“Rohtas is as good as Master is, to tell you the truth.” Stellaria dropped a bombshell.

“Seriously!?” *Rohtas is that good, huh!* “Mr. Fisalis is strong enough that he defeated an entire troop of enemy soldiers alone, isn’t he?” I asked, thinking I might’ve heard wrong.

“Yes. Rohtas is about on that level. Actually, when Master was younger, he hated that he would always lose to him. But now, Master’s youth and experience as a knight might give him the advantage...? No. Rohtas is definitely still more skilled than he is.” She was blushing like a maiden, spellbound. She was also talking a lot more than usual.

“...You’re actually pretty into Rohtas, aren’t you?”

“Oh my, no! Ohohoho!” She laughed me off.

*But damn, Rohtas is top-tier! If he was the one who taught me swordsmanship, I really would’ve ended up becoming a knight... *Shudder* Thank goodness I have Dahlia instead.*

I was practicing getting out of ropes when both my hands were tied. *Really, what was I aiming for here? How far are we gonna go with this...?* I stared off into the distance.

No, no! This is for self-defense! It’s for my sake! I told myself, trying to pump myself up, but wait—was Rozhe really that dangerous? I mean, I guess it didn’t matter, but...

At first, I’d tried to use force to get out, but all it ended up doing was making the rope dig into my wrists.

“Oww, oww! Why are you digging in so hard!?” I complained to the rope directly, angry at it.

“No, don’t do that! Trying to force it will have the opposite effect. Relax!” Stellaria cried, rushing to untie me. *I’m saved!*

When I rubbed my freed arms and shoulders... she went and tied me up again.

“Now, try again.”

We’re continuing, huh? Really.

Having learned a little from last time, I tried wriggling my hands, slowly loosening the knot bit by bit. It was so strange. I should get her to show me how to tie it later.

“This is hard... My arms are bent at an awkward angle and it’s killing my shoulders!” I muttered my complaints, but I wasn’t gonna get free until I undid that knot.

“Don’t make large movements. It will hurt your arms, and the enemy will notice. You’re nearly there! You can do it, Madam! You’re handy, so naturally you’d be good at this too.” Stellaria did a good job of praising me just when I was about to give up—both because of the pain and how *boring* this all was.

“Huh? R-really? Ahaa! ...Guess I can keep going. Ah, there it is!”

“See! You did wonderfully, Madam! Let’s try with the next knot.” Saying that, she tied me back up with a different knot. She was actually *humming*. *Having fun, Stellaria?*

“Again?” I was done. *Ahh, geez. This is too hard! I wanna stop. Well, I wanted to stop because of the pain in my arms and shoulders, but my escape times are actually starting to get shorter and shorter.*

My studies seemed to be going pretty well. And just like when Rohtas casually pulled out the noble almanac, he kept bringing me more things to do without me realizing. I only ever realized that I’d fallen into his traps afterwards.

Sometimes he’d carry a book and loiter around in a way that’d catch my attention (he was perfect at that) or put something he knew I’d want to see right in my path when I was headed somewhere. Up until now, I’d held off looking at the stuff he had, because it was always thick, difficult-looking books, but...

“That history book actually was revised recently, and we’ve just received a copy. They’ve added more illustrations to make it easier to read.”

“Oooh, I wanna see!”

Thick, but easy to read!

That bag of fruit Mr. Fisalis sent back while he was off on the front lines—the one that’d been tied so tightly you could barely undo it—was apparently based on a historical event I’d never heard of. Mr. Fisalis had tried to comfort me, saying it was just a minor incident that wasn’t well known, but my in-laws and Rohtas both knew the truth. That just showed everyone how little I’d studied. If the history book had more illustrations to make it easier to read, well... then I’d just have to read it!

Other than that, I’d found books like *Economics for Dummies* and *See Flür and Surrounding Countries with Full-color Maps!* lying around. I

could just hear their silent call of “Read this and learn.”

I also found some documents about the duchy (probably written by Rohtas himself). They were illustrated too, of course. *Somehow, Rohtas is even good at drawing.*

...I mean, yeah, they were easier to read with pictures, but...

As the days passed, the dress I’d wear to the Argenteia’s party and the “Viola Sapphire” (damn, it’s embarrassing to say that myself!) jewelry were finished. Mr. Fisalis and I went to the salon to see the results.

“The blue really pops on the white dress, and the design really highlights Viola’s figure. The big ribbon on the back suits her cute nature, too. You did a great job, Madame,” he said, praising the dress.

“Thank you very much, Duke Fisalis.”

“And it’s wonderful how the delicate designs of the jewelry showcases the beauty of the ‘Viola Sapphire.’ This will definitely be incredible advertising,” he continued, looking the necklace and earrings over with a satisfied nod.

“I’m glad that they’re to your liking.” The jeweler looked happy, too.

“Oh, if there’s any stone left, why don’t we make a ring? Or maybe a matching pair for both of us...”

“No.”

“...Really?”

“Yes.”

Mr. Fisalis withered at my refusal, but got back on his feet quickly. “Alright then. Oh, but you need to try on the dress and the jewelry. Dahlia, Stellaria,” he ordered.

“Yes, as you wish.”

The mother-daughter pair whisked me off to the bedroom to get me changed. Once I was all dressed up, I had to put on a fashion show for an excited Mr. Fisalis in the salon. He was super happy about how everything came out.

“Since it’s so plain in the chest area, the ‘Viola Sapphire’ necklace looks stunning. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you look so elegant. But the big ribbon on the back shows your adorable side. Vi, show me the back again.”

“Okay.”

I spun in front of him while he sat with his long legs crossed on the sofa. He really liked the ribbon, so he made me turn around again and again. *How many times do you need me to spin? I’m getting dizzy! And Madame, why did you need to bring the dress here when he was home!?*

While Mr. Fisalis was loving the dress and jewelry, Madame and the jeweler were loving the praise he was heaping on them. He even

tried to ask them to make matching rings again. It seemed like he really wanted *something* to match, since his outfit wouldn't. But knowing him, he'd probably just go get the rings made somewhere anyway.

With the jewelry finished and the final adjustments made to the dress, all we had left was the party.

I was about to leave the salon to change, since the two merchants had left.

"Wait one minute."

"Hm?"

Mr. Fisalis grabbed my arm, stopping me from moving. *What's up?* I turned around, tilting my head in confusion.

"Where did you get that bruise?" He asked, catching a glimpse of a bruise on my wrist.

Huh? I had a bruise? I hadn't even noticed myself, but he was pointing to a faint bruise just around the wrist bone. *Huh? When did I hit it on something? I have absolutely no idea! When I was cleaning, maybe? When I was doing laundry... Wait, I can't tell Mr. Fisalis about either of those!*

...Ah, is it from when I fell from that tree? It's been a while since then, so that might be why it's so faint. "Ummm, uhhhhh, errrrrr..." There was absolutely no way I could tell him I fell out of a tree, so I was trying to figure out what I could say.

"It might have come from our practice getting out of bindings. At the beginning, Madam had a bit of trouble figuring out how much force to use," Stellaria said, giving me a good follow-up.

"Y-Yeah! I thought I could just brute force my way out," I said with a giggle, trying to smooth things over, but he just raised his eyebrows.

"Self-defense is important, but I don't like Viola getting injured. Watch out from now on," he warned Rohtas, Dahlia, and Stellaria using a firmer tone than usual.

"We apologize." The servants bowed obediently in response.

It's all my fault...! I'm sorry! I'll be the one watching out from now on!

12 — Mr. Fisalis the Romantic

And so... the day of our first evening party in a long time finally arrived.

I'd gone to a few official events while Mr. Fisalis was away, but this'd be the first private party I'd been to since that one at the Argenteia's where I'd gotten that intense first impression of Ms. Verbena. *Wait, the Argenteias again? They must really love their parties. ...No, that's just how true aristocrats act! Socializing is like breathing to them! I don't think I'll follow their example, though.*

Today, I'd be wearing the beautiful dress that Madame Fleur made for me, as well as the jewelry made from the Viola Sapphires (...*still can't get used to calling them that*). I was all ready to go! The chest was a fair bit more open than I was used to, but it was all to accentuate the Viola Sapphires. *You just have to endure it, self! "Don't worry—Viola Sapphires will make even the flattest chest attractive!" Oh, what a good slogan!*

My outfit was perfect and my makeup was great. They'd put my hair up to show off the necklace—that way, you could see the jewelry from every side! I turned in front of the mirror, checking out my Battle Mode self from a bunch of different angles.

"I'll become the billboard!" I said, clenching my fist to pump myself up.

"Billboard...? Ah, you mean for the sapphires! Don't worry, just the fact that *you're* the one wearing them will be advertisement enough." Stellaria, who had been helping me get ready, stared blankly at me while I did my weird little self-confirmation before breaking out into giggles.

I side-eyed her as I touched the sapphire accessories that the jeweler had poured his heart into. Not only was it covered in Viola Sapphires, it was also lavishly decorated with diamonds. It was heavy to wear, both literally and figuratively. *My shoulders are gonna get so stiff...*

"The sapphires are the real stars tonight, so I'm gonna do my best to show them off! Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to handle this low-cut neckline..." I said, glaring at the expanse of visible chest and trying to subtly pull up the dress a bit out of embarrassment. But Stellaria noticed, pulling it back down to its proper place. *Fine, fine. It's low cut, but it's not like there's anything to see there anyway.*

Stellaria noticed my bitter glare towards my boobs and tried to comfort me, saying, “A big pair of knockers would only get in the way.”

“Knockers!?” I couldn’t help but burst out laughing at what she called them.

“Now, time for the finishing touch.” Once we’d all had a good laugh, Stellaria took my left hand and slid a ring onto my finger. It was covered in tiny sapphires and rubies.

We had a ring made too? When? But...

“Wow... It’s beautiful!” Seeing the gorgeous ombré effect made from so many dazzling gems, I cried out in wonder.

“It looks so wonderful!” Stellaria was spellbound, too.

“But... when was this made?”

“Ah~ I guess there were stones left over. That’s all I know...”

“Huh. Okay.”

She was avoiding my gaze and mumbling, but that must’ve meant she actually didn’t know. I didn’t pry, instead holding up my hand to look at the perfectly-fitted ring. *How’d they manage that?*

It looked as if there were three different types of stones: diamonds, rubies, and sapphires. They were pavé set, clustered so tightly together that they formed a single rounded line, which looked solid despite its simplicity. *How many stones did it take to make this ring? It looks three... four stones high? And then the stones go all the way around the width. Wow! I can’t even count them all.*

Whatever the case, it was sparkly. It looked so striking, but the multiple colors they used made it a little bit cute too. And then, while I was enamored with the beautiful ring...

“There still haven’t been any ‘Viola Eye’ sapphires unearthed, so this ring was made using ordinary sapphires, pigeon blood rubies, and diamonds. All of the highest quality from the duchy, of course. Though the same kinds of stone were used, each one has a slightly different color, so they used that to make a ombré pattern—” Dahlia gave me an explanation, but I lost interest halfway through... I mean, she began to use big words and it just went in one ear and out the other. *Sorry, Dahlia.* Anyway, the jewels were all super expensive and delicately chosen.

But they were all from our duchy... And of the highest quality, too. I’d heard earlier that *everything* mined in the duchy was of the highest quality. *Eugh, just thinking of the price of these is making me dizzy. Oh, wait.* The necklace and earrings I was wearing were very obviously worth even more than the ring.

O-Oh no. I’m a walking jewelry box! There’s gotta be some bunch of hooligans lurking around, just waiting to come at me for all these jewels! So that’s why I was learning self-defense!

The moment I realized, my pure-bred commoner hands started shaking. What happened to my Battle Mode? In the mirror, I could see myself shaking like a leaf from just the thought of actually wearing so much valuable jewelry.

I managed to finish getting ready somehow and headed down the hall to the entrance, where Mr. Fisalis was already waiting. “Are you re—” He started asking the moment he saw me, but stopped halfway through, staring at me with his mouth wide-open.

“Hm?” *Huh? Do I look weird or something?*

Worried, I looked down at myself, but everything there seemed pretty normal to me. Well, not *normal*—a lot more gorgeous than usual, actually. I stared back at him, confused, but he must have come back down to earth, because his blank look was gone and replaced with a sparkling smile.

“You look stunning tonight! I don’t want to share your beauty with everyone at the party!” he said, dashing over to me. It seemed as though he was just shocked by my transformation. *Geez, don’t scare me like that!*

“Really? Then why don’t we stay home tonight?”

“Yes, let’s stay home!”

“...What are the two of you saying? You can’t do that—leave your jokes as jokes. The former duke and duchess are already waiting in the carriage.”

“Okaaaaay...”

Rohtas’s ice-cold reality check brought the two of us back down from orbit. *Grr, just when Mr. Fisalis said we didn’t have to go... Rohtas is so mean.*

Mr. Fisalis, coming straight over to me and grabbing my hands, gave me one of his sweeeeeet smiles and some of his sweeeeeetest words. He was decked out in blue today. He’d said that we wouldn’t be matching tonight, but here we were, subtly connected. *You did it, Mr. Fisalis!*

He took my hand and threaded our fingers together. This was how we were going to escort each other. We’d decided that back in Le Pied after I made one throw-away comment.

In Flür, the usual escort style was having the man put his arm around the woman’s waist, but I really didn’t like that.

“I hate how close together we get when you hold my waist. It’s hard to walk. It feels like you’re pushing me,” I’d said, back at our villa.

“I’m really not, but... How about we link arms instead?” he countered.

“It’s still too close and hard to walk,” I refused. *Sorry for being selfish. But either way, I can’t stand getting that close to you.*

After I explained my issue with it, he came up with a third option: “How about we just hold hands? That way, we can be as close or far away as we want.” He took my hand and showed me as an example.

Ooh, that works! I was super happy with the distance between us.

And so, it was decided he’d escort me by holding my hand. The whole hand-on-waist deal was just the norm, not a rule set in stone. Mr. Fisalis said something about it being “just for us”, but I ignored him.

But today, something felt off when we held hands. I noticed something cold and hard against my finger. I’d held hands with him many times, but I’d never felt anything like that. Curious, I looked down, only to see a ring of the same design as mine—on the same exact finger!

Thinking back, he’d said something about matching rings when we were settling details about the jewelry, but I was under the impression I’d vetoed it. Just when I thought we’d only got one ring, he snuck in one for himself, too!

My ring was tri-colored, with rubies, sapphires, and diamonds, but his was just a diamond and sapphire gradient in an elegant design that didn’t seem out of place on a man. It was also pavé set, of course.

I pulled his left hand up in front of my eyes to get a better look.

“Ah, you noticed! It turned out wonderfully, didn’t it? They’d dug up some good sapphires, but they were so small I wasn’t sure what we could do with them. Then, the jeweler suggested using normal ones to make rings. They came out better than expected. You liked yours too, didn’t you?” he said with a bashful smile.

“...”

I stood there frozen while he continued. “It’s too bad we didn’t get any ‘Viola Eyes,’ but I’m glad we found a use for the smaller gems. ...Hm? Do you not like the ring?” Noticing that I was silently staring back and forth between our rings, he looked a bit worried.

“Ah, no—I do. It’s cute.”

“Thank goodness!”

It wasn’t that I didn’t like it—I was just thinking about how he’d managed to sneak in yet another matching element. I glanced back at Stellaria, who looked away. *So, she was mumbling because she knew the whole time. I get it now.*

Mr. Fisalis was obviously relieved that I liked the ring. “Since it’s so simple, it shouldn’t be a bother to wear everyday.”

“No, no, look at all the rocks on this thing! I’d be terrified of having a single stone fall out!”

What did he mean, “simple”? It was packed with pricey gems all the way around—and in multiple rows, too! How the heck could you call that *simple*!? When I tried to object to wearing something so

expensive in my daily life...

“Oh, no need to worry. Everything about it was perfectly calculated by highly skilled people, so there’s no way they’ll fall out. Wear the ring all you want.”

He shot me down. If I argued anymore, it’d seem like I had no faith in the jeweler’s skills... Ghh.

“And I’ll wear mine all the time, too.”

“Huh? Yours too? With that many stones, even if they’re perfectly set, wouldn’t it be a bother to wear at work?”

I’d think it’d get in the way of using a sword. Hm? Or... did he hold his sword in his right hand? I can’t remember.

“I’m planning on having it on a chain around my neck while I work.”

“Oh! I’ll do that too—”

“Oh, no, no, no. You MUST wear it on *that finger specifically*.”

He put a lot of emphasis on “that finger”. Why?

“Does it mean something on that finger?”

“In a country far from ours, they say that rings mean different things depending on where they are worn. The left ring finger means ‘progress in love’ or ‘deepening the bonds of love.’”

“...”

“So you absolutely MUST keep it there!”

Damn, he’s so cute when he blushes and smiles bashfully like that... I couldn’t say no when I could almost see the little tail wagging behind him. I kinda thought this before, but he’s really a romantic, huh...

13 — Tonight's Party...

We'd finally arrived at the Argenteia manor. I'd thought the same thing the last time I was there, but it was really wonderful. The Wahl River ran through the manor grounds, beautifully reflecting the glimmering light of the fires lit along its banks. It might not have been as fancy as the Fialis manor, but I still had to admit it was beautiful.

Wait. I was boasting just now, wasn't I?

Our carriage quietly stopped at the porch and the Argenteias' servants opened the door for us. It was nice how Father Fialis got out first and tenderly escorted Mother Fialis out, but I decided to ignore how he was holding her. I would've very much preferred if they'd keep the flirting to a minimum in front of their daughter-in-law, because I didn't know where to look. Mr. Fialis, on the other hand, must have been used to it, because he completely ignored them.

While I was distantly watching my in-law's lovey-dovey antics, Mr. Fialis finally spoke up. "Let's get going."

"Ah, o-okay!" While I'd been spacing out, he'd already exited the carriage. Realizing I was still sitting, I hurried to stand up. He held his hand out to me from outside the door, so I took it and stepped down out of the carriage. Our fingers naturally laced together and our "personal escort-style" was complete.

In front of us, my in-laws were doing the standard waist-hugging style—the one that I found too hard to walk with. It really sucked if you weren't both walking at the same speed. But I guess that usually didn't really matter, since the man would try to match the woman's pace. But if you weren't used to that kind of thing, you'd end up focusing way too much on your walking speed.

In my case, I always felt like I was being pushed. Not that Mr. Fialis was actually pushing me or anything—it was just like I was being unwillingly(?) forced into social situations I didn't want to be in.

But my in-laws didn't seem awkward at all—probably because they were so lovey-dovey in the first place. Father Fialis was matching Mother Fialis's speed, while she was leaning into her husband's arms with perfect trust. *Man, they're such a nice couple.*

Then there was us, walking along behind them holding hands. Just like Mr. Fialis had said, holding hands let us be at various distances from each other. It was fun. If I walked slower than him, the distance would grow and it'd be as if I was being pulled along.

Hauling mode! If I walked the same speed, we ended up beside each other, which made us look like equals. If I walked faster than him, it made me look like *I* was the one dragging *him* along—like we were going, “Oh, dear! Hurry up!” and “Wait for me~!”

It was great how different it felt based on where we stood in relation to each other. But while I was changing my speed and playing with how that changed our hand-holding, Mr. Fisalis ended up looking at me with a strained smile. “What... are you doing?”

Wah, he saw! How embarrassing! “I was seeing how things changed based on my walking speed...”

“You were falling back and then pulling ahead... Well, whatever, as long as you’re having fun.”

“You were watching?”

“The whole time.”

So he saw me smirking to myself. Hahaha. Let’s try to smooth my embarrassment over with a smile.

When I smiled, he smiled back. “If you keep doing that, we’re going to get separated,” he said, tightening his fingers around my own. *He’s really holding on here.* After that, we just walked beside each other for the most part.

Father Fisalis noticed us walking behind him and his wife while holding hands, and asked Mr. Fisalis, “Hm? You’re going for a different style of escorting?”

“Yes. Vi prefers it this way,” Mr. Fisalis replied, lifting our hands a bit to show him.

“You don’t see it often, but it really does make you seem intimate.”

“Oh, Dear, what are you saying! They don’t LOOK intimate, they ARE intimate! But I love how it’s just their style~!”

“Yep, it’s our style.”

Smiiiiile. That look says that’s exactly what he was thinking.

My in-laws accepted all of this with amused smiles, but you could really tell they were parent and child. *Mother Fisalis thinks the same way Mr. Fisalis does.*

Once we arrived at the venue, I noticed that there were fewer people than I expected. I didn’t think that every noble in the country was going to be there, but I thought it’d be on a similar scale as the last time I was here. *This is an Argenteia party, right? What happened?*

While I was looking around, confused, Mr. Fisalis leaned in and whispered in my ear, “They didn’t invite as many people this time—just their friends and family. You can relax.”

Relax? Are you serious, Mr. Fisalis? ...Sorry, I fell back on my usual retorts there for a second. But no, seriously—this is a ton of people for only inviting familiar faces. And there are no familiar faces for me, you know?

Don't underestimate how much of a shut-in I am. Even if it's smaller than last time, the party is still huge! Just what you'd expect from top-notch nobles.

First, we went to greet the hosts, Duke and Duchess Argenteia.

"Thank you so much for inviting us."

"Welcome, Cercis, Viola. It's been a while."

"Yes, it has," I replied, giving a graceful, ladylike greeting.

Fufufu... perfect again today!

After some small talk, we headed to the party floor. My in-laws were going to stay to talk a little more with the Duke and Duchess, so we split there.

"What should we do first? Dance, or greet everyone?" Mr. Fisalis asked as we walked, still holding hands.

Hmm... It wouldn't be good if I just parked myself in a chair and ate when we've only just arrived, and neither would just be zooming straight in on someone I know (probably one of the older ladies) and chatting them up.

And more importantly, I came here today prepared to be the billboard for "Viola Sapphires!" Yes, I was getting desperate—why do you ask? But regardless, I have to stand out as much as possible to get the word out about those gems!

I'd pumped myself up, but this was all still the exact opposite of how I was usually, so it took a lot of courage. Normally, I'd be headed straight for the edge of the party or hiding somewhere I wouldn't stand out. But since I'd come all this way, I'd just have to suck it up.

If I wanted to show myself off, greeting everyone was probably the best choice. Since I didn't know who had been invited today, it'd be a good idea to do that and feel out the venue.

"Let's greet everyone first. We have to tell everybody about your transfer too, after all," I said after considering the question from every single angle I could.

"That's true. Let's show things off by chatting with everyone a bit first."

Grin. He was smiling. *Hm? Are smiles and grins the same thing? And by "things," he means the Viola Sapphires, right?*

Before we could even consider who to greet first, people came flooding over to greet us.

"Good evening Duke Fisalis, Duchess."

"Good evening."

The man coming up to greet Mr. Fisalis is... Ah, that's right! That's Count Crocus! I'm friends with your daughter. And that's Marquis Sanguinneah, isn't it? Miss Iris's father. He looks a bit more chubby than he did in the portrait...

Wait. Oooh! I'm matching names to faces here, thanks to that "Noble's

Almanac: Portrait Edition”! Woah. Thanks, Rohtas! Thanks to that book, I know who’s who! I should thank him profusely when I get home.

I was finally seeing the light. I knew most of the guest’s names, and that definitely made me feel less alone. Just my opinion, though☆

But unfortunately, I still didn’t recognize their wives or children. My social circle was ridiculously tiny, after all.

“Congratulations on becoming the Vice Captain of the Royal Guard.”

“Thank you. It’s a heavy responsibility, but I’m glad I won’t have to leave home as much anymore.”

“Oho? You’re worried about leaving your home?”

“Yes! I can’t bear to be away from my lovely wife.”

“I’m glad you have such a close relationship. Oh, but speaking of your wife, I’ve heard that your duchy has begun handling sapphires.”

“You have sharp ears.”

“Word has spread all throughout high society already, after all!”

“My wife is actually wearing some now. They’re named ‘Viola Sapphires,’ after her eyes.”

They’d talk a bit about Mr. Fisalis’s transfer before swinging the conversation over to the “Viola Sapphires.” We weren’t bringing it up—everyone else was!

I had an easy job of just standing beside him and smiling, but I felt something being chipped away inside me as his Beloved Wife Syndrome came out to play. Normally, I’d rush to stop him, but I had to hold back this time. *Do your best, me!*

Not only did he show off my earrings and necklace, but our matching rings too. I mean, yeah, it’s good for publicity, but it’s still kinda embarrassing.

We wandered the floor, stopping here and there to say hello and advertise our sapphires.

“Look—everyone’s focused on you, Viola.” Mr. Fisalis was saying that, but I was certain he was mistaken. They must’ve been looking at him, and then they just happened to notice the beautiful sapphires I was wearing.

But seriously, his sparkling-handsome-man aura was incredibly impressive. I always stood out just by standing next to him. *Ahaha, I forgot what this was like. Why couldn’t we just use him as the billboard instead?*

...I-I’m not sulking!

“They’re looking at you, not me,” I argued.

“No, you’re the one shining the most brightly and beautifully here.”

There he goes, turning the tables on me! I nearly tripped over my

own feet when I heard those sweet words of his so close to my ear. *That was dangerous. But he says that stuff so easily, without even batting an eye. And here I am blushing red as a tomato! Geez. Calm down, me.*

"That's not true. Everyone here looks just as wonderful, after all," I said, glancing around as I ignored his sweet words.

It might have just been my imagination, but it looked like there were more young people here than usual. I'd managed to remember the family heads' faces from the portraits in the almanac, but that didn't help at all with their children.

"I hope they'll release a *Noble's Almanac* — *Now With Family Members, too!* Edition..."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Mr. Fisalis looked blankly at me, and I realized I must have said that out loud!

"Oh, it's just that I read through the *Noble's Almanac* a while ago, so I know the faces and names of people here. I was just thinking about how I wanted portraits of their family members, too. I can recognize the head of each family, but I don't know the rest of them, after all."

I could count the noble young men and ladies on both my hands—not like that was anything to be proud of or anything.

"Ah, I see. Then let's tell Celosia when we see him. They specifically invited all the eligible young folk, after all."

"Really?"

Why? Wasn't this party supposed to be just people they knew? Now I was the one looking at him blankly.

"This party is also about finding a partner for Verbena," he explained with a laugh, whispering to me so no one else could hear.

"A partner for Miss Verbena?"

"Shh! Too loud!"

"Ack, I'm sorry!"

Mr. Fisalis shushed me with a finger to his wryly smiling lips, so my hands shot up to cover my mouth.

I was shocked to hear the party's goal. So it was really a party to search for Miss Verbena's husband, huh? Miss Verbena, the daughter of a duchy almost as important as the Fisalis family's! Shouldn't she have her pick of suitors? Wouldn't they just bring their proposals directly to her parents through official channels rather than showing up at a party like this?

And having such a huge evening party to search for a husband... First-class aristocrats really do things on a different scale! I was stunned by my glimpse into another world.

"Yep. Celosia told me they'd been getting proposals left and right, so they had a mountain of family charts piling up."

"I imagine!" Of course they would, with her status and prestige.

“But she’s not interested in looking at any of them, so Lord Argenteia was at his wit’s end.”

“Ah...” Miss Verbena had a thing for Mr. Fisalis, after all. She’d been the number one candidate to marry the most sought-after bachelor in Flür, and then my plain butt swooped in and got married to him. Snatched right out from under her nose, right? Of course she wouldn’t be able to look at other men so soon after *that*.

“Her father is worried that she’s going to miss her chance to marry, but Verbena doesn’t care.”

I’m sorry... I’m the reason she might not get married. I can barely stand it.

As I was lamenting my actions, Mr. Fisalis laughed. “You have nothing to feel bad about.”

Ah, he read my thoughts. “I mean, yeah, but... Just a thought, but what if you two *had* gotten married like she’d wanted...”

“It would’ve never happened. Don’t underestimate the power of fate. No matter what, I would have met you,” he interrupted me. Embarrassed me, too.

That’s right, he’s a romantic. I wasn’t the type to believe in fate or anything like that, but I wouldn’t deny it might’ve had a part in our marriage.

“That’s right~” *Forgive my strained smile.*

“Anyway, Lord Argenteia and Verbena had a huge argument, and he ended up telling her she had to meet with her suitors and pick someone herself. Celosia was complaining about it.”

“Wow...” A father and daughter battling over a mountain of family charts... It was easy to imagine the Argenteias arguing just like that.

It seemed as if Mr. Fisalis was thinking the same thing, because we looked at each other and smiled wryly.

“All of the attendees have been carefully selected, with their background and character picked through with a fine tooth comb, so they’re all exceptional matches. And of course it was her two older brothers who did the investigating. They did a lot of digging for tonight.”

“...Gee, that sounds rough.” Even though they had their own jobs to do, they did their best to find their little sister a marriage partner. *Miss Verbena, you’re so loved!*

“Viola. What—or should I say, who do you think has it rough?”

“Um, Duke Argenteia, the elder brothers, and Miss Verbena herself?”

“...So, you mean... all of them.”

14 — Advertising!

Finally I realized—the party was to find a future husband for Miss Verbena. And since they’ve invited all of the most eligible young bachelors, that in turn drew in the young ladies. That’s why there were more young people there.

But from the perspective of the person who snatched Mr. Fisalis out from under her nose, I’d love it if we could just switch places...

“Vi. You’re thinking something weird again, aren’t you?” the aforementioned Mr. Fisalis said, gripping my hand even tighter. *Oww!*

“Oh, not at all!” *He read my mind again! I don’t think I said anything out loud, did I?* I rushed to deny it, but he looked down at me with an ice-cold, princely glare. I gave him a puppy-dog look in return.

“It was written all over your face.” *It was written all over my face!?*

...Ahem. It’s not like I can actually switch places with her, anyway, so I can only hope for Miss Verbena to meet a wonderful man here at this party.

“Oh, Minister of Justice. It’s been a while.”

“I’m glad to see you well, Duke Fisalis. I hear that you’ve been transferred to the Royal Guard.”

“Yes, I have. I’ve actually become the Vice-Captain, in fact. Since I’ll be mainly guarding the palace, we’ll be seeing a lot more of each other. I look forward to working with you.”

“As do I. Hahaha!”

Mr. Fisalis and the Minister of Justice were in full-on lip service mode. But Mr. Fisalis’s sparkling smile made his small talk feel less like empty compliments. It was an amazing skill. *And here I am, just standing beside him and smiling!*

“By the way, is your wife wearing those sapphires I’ve been hearing about?” Just when I thought they were gonna keep going with the small talk, the Minister changed the topic to the sapphires.

“So, you’ve heard already! Yes, they are. What do you think? They’re quite wonderful stones, so I believe they’ll become just as important to my duchy as our pigeon blood rubies,” Mr. Fisalis latched onto the topic with a full-blown smile, having been just *waiting* for him to bring them up. They were the main reason we were here today, after all.

Since the subject had changed to the gems, my job was to puff out my non-existent chest and make sure the sapphires looked beautiful

from the Minister's point of view. I thought about where the lights in the room were and slightly adjusted how I stood to make them sparkle beautifully. *Yep, I think I got 'em sparkling prettily. How's that?*

"The necklace's design is wonderful, but the sapphires just make it look even better. You're correct in thinking they'll be the pride of your duchy. And I've heard that they're named after your wife," the Minister said with a smile after a completely chaste glance at the gorgeous necklace resting on my chest. The dress was daringly low cut, but since I was basically an un-sexy ironing board in that area, there was no way anyone would check me out.

"Yes! They're the same color as my dear Vi's eyes, so I named them 'Viola Sapphires' after her!" Mr. Fisalis said with a self-satisfied look at the Minister's compliment. He said it while gesturing at me, so I put on my salesman smile! And since they were talking about my eyes, I kept them wide open with an equally wide smile!

"How wonderful!" The minister was smiling at me after hearing the origins of the name, but it seemed pretty lukewarm...

While I was going red in the face from the Minister's smile (from shame, not bashfulness!), Mr. Fisalis didn't even blink. Instead...

"Your wife also has lovely sapphire-colored eyes, doesn't she? And I seem to recall that your daughter inherited those beautiful eyes from her mother. Are they not with you tonight? I haven't seen them around," he said, smoothly bringing up the Minister's family.

But wow, Mr. Fisalis! I didn't think he'd know the eye colors of people that weren't even here!

...Ah, he must remember because they're women, huh! Even so, impressive memory! I gave him a little bit of a respectful glance and he looked back into my eyes, smiling.

Meanwhile, the Minister must've just been happy that his wife and daughter's eyes were referred to as "beautiful," so his smile got even wider. "They should be somewhere around, actually. We were just together a moment ago. And you're correct, Duke—both of them have the same sapphire eyes! When they heard that your duchy was to begin selling new gems, they were so excited. They've been wondering what they'd look like," he said, looking at my necklace.

"Then why not give them some accessories that use our sapphires?"

"I definitely will. They're named after the incredibly popular Duchess Fisalis, after all! Both my wife and daughter are fans of yours, so they'll be ecstatic."

"Wha—!? ...O-Oohohoho! Oh my, thank you for the kind words!" I'd just been standing around smiling silently as they talked, but the Minister suddenly addressed me directly. My eyes widened in surprise, but I quickly caught myself and fixed my smile back in place.

Geez, that scared me! Saying your wife and daughter are my fans isn't funny, Minister! And Mr. Fisalis here is just naturally making sales. Maybe he would've made a great businessman.

Anyway, thank you for buying "Viola Sapphires!" Ah, Rohtas is waiting in another room to take your payment (not).

After our chat with the Minister of Justice, we wandered around the venue greeting everyone. And of course, everywhere we went people were asking about the Viola Sapphires. They all wanted to know where and when they could buy them.

And just like back with the Minister, Mr. Fisalis got all their wives' and daughters' eye colors right. If they were blue, he'd just plug the sapphires, but if they were different, he'd suggest pairing the sapphires with stones in a coordinating color. All of the gems he suggested were mined in our duchy, too☆ You could've been a fantastic gem merchant, Mr. Fisalis!

And he used the full power of his sparkling smile as he said it all, making every noble snap up a sale. *So, his smile doesn't just deal critical charm damage to ladies—it works on old men too! Mr. Fisalis, you've sure got a lot of maxed-out skills, huh?*

15 — Changes

Once we finished circling the venue to greet everyone, we implemented our “show off the sapphires as we dance” plan. As we watched the guests on the dance floor, waiting for the song to end...

“Huh, Verbena?” Mr. Fisalis must’ve caught sight of Miss Verbena dancing, but he was acting strange. Why did he look baffled?

“Where is Miss Verbena?” She hadn’t been around when we greeted her parents. She had to be here somewhere, but so far we’d failed to spot her.

I tried following his gaze, but I didn’t see her. But then again, I’d only met her once—at the party back then—so I didn’t really remember what she looked like! I did recall that she wore her thick golden hair in ringlets and her figure and dress were both gorgeous... Hm? Maybe I was totally off-base here, but I was kind of picturing a particular paramour I once knew...

“Miss Verbena kind of looks like Miss Calendula, doesn’t she?” I let slip as I scanned the room.

*“*Cough*! *Cough, cough!*”* Mr. Fisalis started choking beside me.

Whatever—forgetting about that. I searched for Miss Verbena based on my limited memories, but I couldn’t find her.

“She’s right there,” Mr. Fisalis said, pointing her out since I still couldn’t see her.

“Ah... Huh!?” I clapped my hand over my mouth after letting out an undignified screech and did a double take.

Miss Verbena looked *nothing* like how I remembered! Tonight’s star was dancing with some young man, but she wasn’t the same gorgeous woman that I remembered!!

Even Mr. Fisalis looked taken aback by her appearance. Judging from how he was acting, she must’ve been different from how he remembered her too.

The last time I saw Miss Verbena, she was wearing an elaborate dress showing off her figure and her golden hair was curled into a gorgeous, fanciful style. She was in full swing. But today, she was completely the opposite. Her sparkling golden hair was up loosely and cascading down her back, decorated with tiny flowers for a very cute look. And her dress wasn’t loaded with frills, but instead a simple design. The simplicity still accentuated her great figure, of course. *I-I’m so jealous!* The muted magenta color really suited her, too.

... *Wait.*

“Mr. Fisalis, she kind of looks different than I remember.”

Whisper.

“You think so too? I agree.”

Whisper.

We whispered our observations to each other. But we must have been staring *too* much, because Miss Verbena shot a glare our way.

Oh, good. It's still the same Miss Verbena!



But what made her change her look? Mr. Fisalis and I sneakily kept watching her in mute amazement.

“Miss Viola! It’s been so long since I last saw you!” someone suddenly called from behind me. Recognizing the voice, I turned around and realized that it was Miss Iris and her usual group of party girls. Since they went to nearly every event and there were tons of young men here, of course they showed up!

But Miss Iris looked different, too. She used to like big frilly dresses in cute designs and colors, but tonight she was in a simple, low-key sky blue dress. No frills at all.

Huh, what? So even Miss Iris has changed her image? “Miss Iris, it’s been a while! You look... a bit different, tonight,” I greeted her, getting straight to the point.

She must’ve been glad I pointed it out, because she said, “Ufufufu! I’m happy you noticed! This dress is actually based on the design of the dress you wore to the last function. Simple dresses have been very ‘in’ lately.” She showed it off with a twirl.

Oooh, now that she mentioned it, I recognized it from somewhere. “It looks amazing! You have a much nicer figure than I do, so the design looks beautiful~!” She was slender, but in a much different way from me (not saying WHAT was different!), so the feminine line of her dress looked wonderful. It made Madame’s dressmaking worth it. *I-I’m not jealous. Sometimes you just don’t have some things! There’s nothing I can do about that!*

“Oh, I’m nowhere near as lovely as you. Slender women like you are the standard of beauty right now,” she said, frowning obviously as I gazed at her appreciatively. *Hey. Where are you looking? Hey!*

“That’s right. I’ve been working hard to lose weight, so I don’t miss the trend!” Earl Krokusse’s daughter said, stepping forward. *Ooh, her pudgy... *Cough, cough* I mean, soft body has slimmed down quite a bit! The other two are wearing simple dresses, too.*

Huh? Seriously, what’s happened in high society since I last got out!? Is this just how fashion trends come and go? As I looked around, surprised that their vibe had gone from busy and gorgeous to simple and elegant, I noticed that a lot of the ladies were actually wearing simple dresses—especially the younger ones.

Now that I thought about it, I could remember Madame and Stellaria talking about how things like that were in style now. They also said that people had been ordering the same design of dress that I’d been wearing... So this was why... I felt faint for a moment, and Mr. Fisalis caught me.

“I see... so the trends have changed,” he said after listening silently to our conversation.

“That’s right! Not just for dresses, either—the ‘simple, natural’ look is in fashion for *everything*. Every young lady looks up to Miss Viola, after all! But of course, Miss Viola herself is still at the top,” she replied with a faint blush, but I wouldn’t be fooled. *She has to be lying; it’s just lip service! No one would look up to anyone as flat and plain as me!*

“Oh, that’s not true,” I said. “You must be thinking of someone else! I don’t get out that often, after all.” I saw right through that empty compliment and started to point out the flaws in it, but...

“Right! I suppose everyone understands how wonderful Viola is, huh?” *Someone* took the lip service seriously, with a full blown smile.

Wait, Mr. Fisalis! You aren’t supposed to agree with her, you know! Oh no... It’s happening again. If I don’t stop him, he’ll start again with that humiliating “my wife is the best!” routine!

I rushed to stop him before he started saying anything weird. Just as I was thinking about physically covering his mouth...

“Ah~ There you are, Comman... I mean, Vice Captain! And nice to see you, Madam!” Corydalis appeared, greeting us casually. Though he was usually dressed in his gallant knight uniform, he was wearing a tailcoat for the party. It was a chic cool gray, and it looked wonderful on him. He walked over to us, one hand raised and smiling.

Corydalis, my hero!

“Oh, it’s you, Corydalis. Just when I was about to tell these ladies about how great Viola is...”

“Good evening, Corydalis! Good to see you here as well!”

“Vi...” Mr. Fisalis’s smile up until now had vanished, changing to a sour look, but I replaced it with my own big smile. *He looks like he wants to say something, but I don’t care*☆

“I got a demand... I mean, *request* to come as the third son of Marquis Pulcherrima rather than a knight. Really isn’t my thing, though~” Corydalis explained with a strained smile. *I understand completely.*

“It really was more of a threatening letter. Celosia himself came to the Royal Guard’s post and laid the invitation down on Corydalis’s desk *very* obviously.”

“The Consul is so mean! He left it somewhere you’d definitely see. That meant I couldn’t sneakily get rid of it without anyone knowing.”

“That’s just how he is,” Mr. Fisalis chuckled in amusement while Corydalis just looked worn out. *Mr. Fisalis, you’re just as bad as Consul Argenteia...*

Just as I was watching their friendly chat, Miss Iris whispered in my ear, “That’s former Special Ops Vice Commander Pulcherrima, right?”

“Yes, it is. He’s a really interesting man,” I whispered back.

“I’ve heard that he’s excellent at his job. And he seems like a wonderful man with a nice personality,” she muttered. *Are her eyes shining!? Did she just lock onto Corydalis!?* Miss Iris was giving him a discerning look as he talked to Mr. Fisalis.

“He is a wonderful man! Ohohohoho!” I tried to gloss things over with a laugh.

“And he’s on the Duke’s level, physically...” Miss Krokusse said, staring at him, spellbound.

“I’ve seen him in his knight’s uniform. He looked so manly,” whispered Miss Nastersham.

“And if he’s here, that means he’s single,” Miss Columbine’s eyes sparkled too.

Hey, guys? If everyone in your friend group locks onto the same guy, there’s a bloodbath in the future!

“Corydalis isn’t the only wonderful man here! Everyone here is a different type of wonderful. What a sight for sore eyes! Even *I’m* getting distracted!”

I was just rambling to change the topic so the four of them wouldn’t start fighting. I mean, it wasn’t a lie. But it just so happened that I said it during a lull in Mr. Fisalis and Corydalis’s conversation.

“Vi. What did you just say? You’re getting distracted by all of these *wonderful* men?” Mr. Fisalis turned from Corydalis and gave me a smile. It was sparkling, but also incredibly intimidating! *And why did he only hear that part!? Listen to the rest, please!*

And he’s squeezing my hand again! It hurts when your fingers dig in!

“The men are wonderful enough to distract me, but Mr. Fisalis really is the most handsome~! That’s what I meant to say~! Aha☆” I said, trying to fix things.

“Hmm. Well, you can tell me all about it later.”

“I will, I will! I’ll tell you everything!”

He gave me an icy smile while I gave him a forced one back. *I’m hiding behind Rohtas the moment we get home.*

While we were smiling/glaring at each other, Miss Iris whispered in my ear with a smile. “Ufufu! I’m so jealous that you and Duke Fisalis are so close~! He really loves you!”

“Huh!? What? No, this is...” I jumped at the sudden jab. “*Loves*?!?”

...

...

...

I can’t really deny it...

16 — Girl Talk

Mr. Fisalis and I had missed our chance to start dancing because we were busy analyzing the trend shift towards simple and natural (well, moreso just Miss Verbena's incredible change). We also ended up talking to Corydalis and Miss Iris.

But thanks to my slip-up about the men here all being sight for sore eyes (even if he misunderstood!), Mr. Fisalis was still gripping my hand tightly. Miss Iris kept teasing me. *It was nice and quiet earlier, so where did that go? I'm here sweating and getting embarrassed. I'm super uncomfortable now!*

"I'd just love to hear all about those sapphires, so let's go somewhere to have a *chat!*"

Smile.

Miss Iris took my opposite hand from the one that Mr. Fisalis was holding, accentuating certain words. Wow. Why am I suddenly feeling trapped? Everyone's so good at using their smiles!

And on the other side:

"It would be rude for us men to intrude on you ladies, so we'll leave you alone. By the way, Vice Captain... the Minister of War was looking for you," said Corydalis.

"Alright. Then we'll separate for a bit. Ladies, please take good care of my wife," Mr. Fisalis agreed, giving the girls a charming smile as he let go of my hand. *He was squeezing it so hard it's gone white!* The moment he did, he sneakily whispered, "I'll be back soon," in my ear.

We found a place to sit, and the moment we sat down, the ladies began their brutal attack. I knew it was coming from Miss Iris's smile from earlier.

"The necklace and earrings you're wearing—those are 'Viola Sapphires,' aren't they?"

"Is it true that only the highest quality ones can be called 'Viola Eyes'?"

"They're the same color as your eyes. So beautiful~"

"I'd love to get my hands on some, but Pommier's owner hasn't gotten them yet."

They shot off questions in rapid succession. This was the perfect time to advertise, but I couldn't get a word in edgewise. I was a failure of a billboard.

The ladies looked at my jewelry and chattered about the

sapphires.

“Duke Fisalis was the one who named them ‘Viola Sapphires,’ wasn’t he?”

And so came the unavoidable question. Miss Iris just asked it straight out. *You’re making it a lot harder to answer.* But I couldn’t escape from their sparkling (more like evilly glinting) eyes.

“...Yes.”

“Kyaaaaaaah!”

I just barely managed to squeeze out the words and they all started screeching in glee. They were all squirming in delight, too! I’d do the same if it was one of my friends, but it was humiliating when it was directed at me. My face was on fire.

“I said it before, but he really does love you! I’m not only talking about the sapphires, either. I mean the gentle way he looks at you, and how considerately he escorts you. I couldn’t look away when I saw you enter hand in hand! Ah, I’m so jealous!” Miss Iris said the same thing as she had earlier.

You don’t have to repeat yourself! My face wasn’t just burning—it was on fire! I mean yeah, Mr. Fisalis started treating me differently when—hmm, maybe even before?—Miss Calendula left, and he’d only had eyes for me since they’d broken up. There might’ve been that one suspicious incident, but he rushed to clear that up as soon as it happened.

And then that time on the hill in Montjuc back in Le Pied... *No.* I’ll get even more embarrassed if I think about that!

I hadn’t minded since no one had teased me about it up until now, but I couldn’t help but be self-conscious about how he thought of me now. When I looked away to try to calm myself down, my eyes just managed to land on Mr. Fisalis anyway. He was so tall and almost seemed to shine, so he stood out wherever he went. It did make him easy to find, buuuuut...

He was talking to someone with Corydalis, but he gave me a small smile when he noticed he’d caught my gaze.

Oh no. I feel so awkward. I can’t even smile back. So many things were shooting through my brain that I just went even redder.

“Oh, Miss Viola, your cheeks are so flushed! How cute!” Miss Iris said, grabbing my hands.

“Miss Viola, Miss Iris just loves cute things. She’ll never leave you alone if you’re not careful,” Miss Nastersham said, laughing.

Seriously? I don’t want that!

“Geez, Miss Amaranth! Cute is justice, after all! ...Hmm? Oh, what a beautiful ring. Are these Viola Sapphires too?” Miss Iris started to banter with Miss Nastersham, but since she was gripping my hands, she’d just now noticed my ring.

“Yes. They made this from the sapphires that weren’t suitable for larger jewelry. Mine has more of a cute design and it’s multicolored, with sapphires, diamonds, and rubies. You could make a ring with a different look if you used differently colored stones. You could make one any color you want!”

I mean, probably. You could, right? I might’ve been talking out of my hat, but I figured it was probably mostly right. I was trying to advertise, so I held my hand up in front of my face to show them as I explained.

“Oh my. You said *mine*. Does that mean that Duke Fisalis has one too?” Miss Krokusse pointed it out. *Whoops, she caught that. She seems so quiet, but she’s sharp... No, I probably just shouldn’t have phrased it that way.*

“Um, er, yes. He has one of the same design...” My enthusiasm had disappeared and I confessed with a mumble.

“Ah, I saw that! Duke Fisalis had a blue ring on his left hand! Geez~ So you match! Paired rings are so wonderful,” Miss Columbine said, as if she’d only just thought of it.

I mean, yeah, they match, but Mr. Fisalis had them made secretly. It’s not like I wanted them... No! I should be advertising right now! This isn’t the place to get embarrassed, self!

“Mr. Fisalis’s ring is made with both sapphires and diamonds, so it must have just looked blue at a glance. It uses different shades of sapphires to make a beautiful ombré,” I said, telling them about his ring as I kept showing mine off.

“Now that I think about it, you’re both wearing your rings on the same hand, and the same finger. Does that mean something?”

Here we were again with the hard-to-answer dig! Miss Columbine had an amazing memory for someone who only got a quick glance at that ring!

“Oh, really? Does the left hand’s ring finger have some kind of meaning?”

“Ummm, Mr. Fisalis said something about rings meaning different things depending on what finger they’re worn on in some faraway country,” I explained, trying to get away from the ring finger part, but...

“So? What does the *left ring finger* mean?” Smile.

They were all leaning towards me. The pressure behind their smiles was going to crush me! *Damn, I can’t get away!* I gave up at the four ladies’ forceful smiles, answering, “...The left ring finger means ‘progress in love, and deepening the bonds of love.’...”

“Kyaaaaaaa!” they screeched again. That was exactly why I hadn’t wanted to say it...

“The Duke is so wonderful! How romantic!”

“Oh, so Duke Fisalis is a romantic! If he said something like that to me, I just might die~!”

“That *has* to get popular!”

“This would become trendy even without our help!”

“Maybe wearing ‘Viola Sapphires’ will make anyone as lovey-dovey as Miss Viola and Duke Fisalis.”

“People will be popping up one after another, trying to get lucky! When I get married, I’m definitely going to have matching rings made!”

The ladies got all worked up again, while I just sat there with my soul leaving my body.

While we sat there chatting about the sapphires and rings instead of dancing and socializing...

“Duchess Fisalis,” someone said from behind me. *Oh no, were we too loud? We must’ve gotten too excited here in the seating area. I’m sorry. But a lot of people are talking to me from behind today... Oh, no.*

I turned around, thinking about how I thought I’d heard that thorny voice before, and of course—it was Miss Verbena.

She had her arms crossed, and was looking at us sort of crankily. And up close, I could see that she really had adopted a natural look. *Wait, no. Don’t just observe! Be sorry.*

“I’m so sorry—were we too loud?” I knew we had been, so I apologized before she’d even said anything. But she stopped me with the fan in her hand.

“Not really. It’s loud in here anyway,” she brushed it off easily. She might’ve taken on a natural look, but her curt nature hadn’t changed. If she wasn’t talking to me because we were too loud, why did she come over here? Did she have something else she wanted to say to me?

“We’ll still be careful not to get too loud. I apologize for not greeting you sooner—you were dancing, after all. Good day to you, Miss Verbena. It’s been a while since we’ve seen each other,” I said as I stood and gave her a lady’s greeting. She was the star of the show tonight, after all.

“It really has been a while. ...Not since that evening party, isn’t it?”

Maybe it was because I’d given her such a stupidly polite greeting, but she was looking at me with eyes wide. *Hmm? Did I do something weird?*

“That’s right. I don’t go to many parties, so we haven’t seen each other in a long time. I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again, but I was shocked by how much your image has changed. That dress looks wonderful on you. It brings out your natural beauty!”

She really did look more charming than she did wearing those

busy dresses, so I wasn't lying! *The dress was probably made by Madame Fleur. I'm so jealous of her good figure! And of course, I'm not going to specify what, exactly, makes me so jealous!*

"I-I'm not copying you! Madame just made me this dress after I asked for something fashionable!" she said, rattling on with a blush after I gave her my honest opinion.

Ahh, so her dress really was made by Madame... Wait. Um, when did I say she was copying me? "Okay," I answered vaguely, tilting my head a bit.

It didn't seem as if Miss Verbena liked my answer, though, because she continued. "It's only like this because simple and slender is the current trend! You've got it so good, not having to lose any weight."

"I see." *I mean, I know you said it with a sigh, Miss Verbena, but I saw where your eyes stopped after giving me a full look-over.* She averted her eyes once she noticed my cold stare.

"W-Well, simple and natural being in style isn't so bad, since it brings out my beauty!"

"Uh huh."

"The design would look better on someone with a trimmer figure. But even if simple is trending, isn't your dress a little *too* plain? Ah, but it does make the ribbon on your back stand out. And it's just right for setting off the necklace you're wearing. Hmph... I might have one of the same style tailored for me, next."

"...Thank you?" I really had no idea how to react anymore. I didn't know what she was trying to say. Was she insulting me or complimenting me? It didn't feel much like an insult.

She was babbling on by herself, so I just gave her half-hearted replies. While I tilted my head and gave vague answers to Miss Verbena's confusing chatter...

"Ah, you're picking another fight with Viola, huh, Verbena?" said Mr. Fisalis as he slipped in over my shoulder. *You scared me! When did you get here!?* I stood frozen in shock while he hugged me from behind.

"Cercis! I-I wasn't picking a fight with her!"

"Mr. Fisalis, she wasn't picking a fight."

"We were just having a *fun* chat about current trends, weren't we, Duchess?"

"Ah, yes... kinda."

We weren't exactly fighting... I think. But I didn't think 'fun' was the word, either, so I muttered the last word quietly.

Miss Verbena seemed offended that he thought she was picking a fight. *If she wasn't, what did she come over to talk to me for? I don't get it.* I racked my brain, trying to figure out what she wanted.

“Verbena just wanted to make friends with Madam Viola. She’d even had an enthusiastic conversation with Madame about what she’d worn where. Isn’t that true, Verbena?” Next, it was Celosia popping up behind Miss Verbena with a smirk. *Huh? That’s not what she said before.*

“Wahhhhhh! Brother, what are you saying! All that work you do is getting to your head and making you say ridiculous things! Ohohohoho!!”

“Oww, oww!”

Miss Verbena’s expression changed, and she started whacking Celosia with her fan. I know it’s kind of rude to say about someone who’s older than me, but it was actually a cute change from her usual composed look.

Mr. Fisalis, the girls, and I watched the Argenteia siblings’ fun little spat with smiles on our faces. It was wonderful how close they were.

“I see. So Verbena just wanted to be Viola’s friend. That’s good, isn’t it, Vi?”

“Yes! I’m happy that she wants to be friends with me.”

Mr. Fisalis was happy, and I actually was glad we’d gotten a little closer, since I didn’t have many aristocratic acquaintances.

“It’s always nice to make new friends.”

“Yes!”

“But I’d be happy if you’d return the favor, too.”

“Really!”

Even Miss Iris and the girls were agreeing. *Yep, everyone should be friends!* I nodded to myself with a big grin.

“Urgh... T-That’s not what I wanted!”

“Huh? What did you want, then?”

Miss Verbena went red as she denied it, but rushed to correct herself when she saw me get disappointed.

“I-I mean, I *guess* we could be friends!”

“Oh, really?”

My dig asking which one vanished into the air.

Miss Verbena looked away, still red. I mean, it’s great that she wants us to be pals, but does she also have a crush on somebody or something like that?

17 — The Party Ends

After I'd become friends(?) with Miss Verbena...

"We should get to dancing soon," Mr. Fisalis said, inviting me to come with him.

I had completely forgotten, but we'd been planning on dancing after finishing our greetings. After being so shocked by Miss Verbena's new look and meeting with the girls and Corydalis, all thoughts of dancing had been thrown to the wayside.

I wanna just get the dancing over with and get out of here. ...Whoops, slipped a bit too much truth in there. I mean, it's been quite a while since the party began, so I'd like to take my leave soon.

...Not much difference, huh?

Whatever. I was exhausted from attending a party when I wasn't used to them, so I *really* wanted to go home. It was well past bedtime for all good little girls and boys. I should've already been asleep!

But I couldn't go home without showing off the sapphires more. I was here to advertise, after all!

"Alright," I replied. I've just gotta make a show out of myself and the gems a bit more, then I could go home, right? "Miss Verbena, Miss Iris, please excuse us while we dance."

"Oh, go ahead! Your beloved hubby is inviting you, after all!"

"See you."

Once I'd said goodbye to Miss Iris and the rest, Mr. Fisalis took my hand and led me towards the dance floor. It was in the very center of the room, surrounded by tables and chairs so people could chat as they watched the dancing. But in reality, it looked like everyone was off in their own little social worlds rather than actually watching the dancing. It might be a bit harder to show myself off than I thought. Well, that's fine with me.

Mr. Fisalis escorted me to the floor, but...

We shouldn't be headed straight there! The sea of people is parting to make a path for us! W-Wait! We're gonna stand out if everyone but us leaves! Ah, but we actually want to stand out... No, no, I think we should stand out just a little, rather than a lot!

But of course, he couldn't hear my panicking inner monologue. He set us up in the single most conspicuous spot, still looking completely unruffled.

We're all alone here! And all of the people who were chatting are

looking at us instead! Why are you all interested in dancing now!?

“M-Mr. Fisalis!? You know we’re *really* drawing a lot of attention right now, right!?” I whispered in his ear.

“We wouldn’t be doing much advertising otherwise!” he answered, ignoring my plight with a smile.

Ah, geez. I know from experience that my complaints won’t get me anywhere. Guess I’ve got no choice. If I’m forced to stand out, I just have to make sure I don’t miss any steps in this dance and humiliate myself further.

I sucked it up and waited for the music to start, only to hear them begin to play a song that was infamous for its difficulty. *Who the heck chose this when there must be people here who are bad at dancing, too!? On top of being the center of attention, I have to dance to this? What kind of ordeal is this!?*

“Of all the songs...” I muttered, scowling.

“It’s a hard one, isn’t it? I’ll have to put in some effort, too,” Mr. Fisalis replied, forcing another smile.

Everyone around us looked completely composed. Top-notch aristocrats really are a different breed! But I’m supposed to be a top-notch aristocrat now too (despite feeling pretty unimportant☆). I couldn’t just keep frowning, so I forced a smile onto my face. It might have just been my imagination, but there weren’t many people around us. They must’ve been trying to avoid attention, unlike us. I mean, you wouldn’t dance in the very center of the floor if you weren’t confident in your skills.

Because we were in an open space, it was bright and my necklace was sparkling. Like, to the point that it was kind of hard to look at it. *Seriously, too sparkly! It’s hurting my eyes!*

“Isn’t it a bit bright here?” I finally broke down and quietly asked Mr. Fisalis.

“Hm? Bright? Maybe because I was aiming for somewhere where the light would shine on your necklace,” he answered calmly.

HEY. So this is YOUR FAULT!?

I’m here trying my hardest not to miss any of these steps, and Mr. Fisalis here is thinking about optimal lighting positions. Way to go... NOT.

He very nearly wiped the smile off of my face. Oh no. I considered faking a misstep and stomping on his foot, but way too many people were watching for me to get away with it. I’d have to hold back, since I’m a big chicken.

“But this really is a difficult dance to follow, isn’t it? Why would they pick this song?” he commented, still dancing. My normal dance lessons were hell, filled with difficult songs, but this one was on another level.

“Maybe they’re using it as a test—like, ‘If you can’t dance to this,

you can't marry Verbena!' or something."

"Who would say something like that?"

"Duke Argenteia."

"That'd be hilarious!" Mr. Fisalis bit back a laugh.

"I'm just joking. But if we can't manage to dance to this song, Rohtas will be angry."

"Yeah, he will be."

We smiled bitterly at each other as we thought back to our rainy day lessons. *I'm glad you understand my pain, Mr. Fisalis!*

"Speaking of Rohtas, haven't you been skipping out on your lessons, lately?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I just haven't been around the manor much as of late. Things have been hectic with my transfer, after all. And my skills haven't gotten *that* rusty," he said, grabbing hold of my waist as if he was going to pick me right up before turning us both elegantly. It was a showy turn, one that made my skirts twirl around impressively. *Hmm, pretty good!*

"That's true. I've been having more dangerous lessons like martial arts and fighting with impromptu weapons than dancing lately, too."

"I know it's hard, but all I can say is do your best. They're all necessary skills."

We were moving in sync. *Perfect balance on that heel turn☆ I'm doing good today!* As we danced together, we shared a few whispered complaints about rainy day lessons.

I had no idea that the people around us were in shock that we could actually carry on a conversation while dancing to such a difficult song, though.

The next song was a hard one too, but we couldn't leave the floor in time, so we ended up dancing through a few more. Yes, I managed to stand the bright lights. Professor Rohtas would be angry if I couldn't dance perfectly even though I was being blinded. He'd only end up working me harder, so I did everything I could to avoid that.

I was thirsty after finally being freed from the dance floor, so I went to get a glass of juice, when...

"Really stood out there, Vice Captain! And your dancing was wonderful, Madam!" Corydalis said, walking up with a smirk.

"Your necklace was shining so brightly, it was like you were wearing the very light itself. Like you'd stepped straight out of a fairy tale. You were the most wonderful couple out there on the floor!"

"It was like you were surrounded in motes of pure radiance~! All eyes were on you!"

"And you made dancing to those difficult songs look so easy, even while everyone around you gave up!"

The girls all looked spellbound, sighing happily.

Looks like we stood out just enough. Mr. Fisalis's plan worked! And I'd noticed there weren't many people around, but it was because they'd all given up on dancing, huh? Wow.

Since I was seriously exhausted, Mr. Fisalis gave the okay to go home, so we were finally able to retreat from the party.

"Let's go find my parents before saying goodbye to Lord Argenteia," he said, offering me his hand. I went to take it, but...

Why am I so embarrassed all of a sudden? We'd been holding hands all night as he escorted me, but for some reason, I was suddenly hyper-aware of it... Probably from Miss Iris teasing me with that 'he loves you' and 'wonderful couple' stuff. She really managed to get under my skin. *Oh no. What am I supposed to do!*

I couldn't bring myself to take his hand casually like I had when we first arrived, so I just stared at it for a while.

He must have wondered why I was taking so long, so he looked me straight in the eyes and asked, "Is something the matter? Are you not feeling well?"

Looking into his dark brown eyes brought me back to reality. *Why did my heart skip a beat when I realized? Whatever. Ahh, of course he's worried, with me suddenly staring off into space!*

"I'm just tired. I'm still feeling fine, though!" I said, taking his hand in a rush to act normal. But it was still kind of embarrassing...

My in-laws were ready to go home, too, so the four of us went together to say goodbye to Duke Argenteia.

Miss Verbena was there, and she gave me a backhanded invitation: "I'll inform you when I'm having my next tea party, so I guess you can come."

I stood there a bit confused. *Do you want me there or not? I really don't know!*

"Madam, Verbena doesn't have many friends, so *please* do make an appearance!"

"Brother!! You didn't have to say that much!"

"Guergh!"

She elbowed Celosia, blushing bright red.

But thanks to his sacrifice, I understood what she meant. Verbenaese was still just a bit too hard for me to grasp. *Please actually say what you mean for once!*

Once all we had left to do was go home to bed, I turned off social battle mode and let my guard down...

"Continuing from where we left off, please do fill me in on the rest of what you were saying before. Ah, or we could even do it on the way home!" Mr. Fisalis said, with his beautiful ice prince smile.

Oh no, I completely forgot about that... And you're squeezing my hand again! Stop with the little attacks—they hurt!

I looked away from his sparkling yet terrifying smile. “Um. Ah, that’s right!! I want to sit beside Mother Fisalis on the way home~!” I said, grabbing her hand as she walked in front of me.

Save me, Mother Fisalis! Your son has gone into ice prince mode and he’s about to freeze me solid!

“Oh my! How cute. Of course~! Cercis, you can sit with your father.” She looked shocked for a moment, since I’d grabbed her hand so suddenly, but a moment later she smiled happily and agreed! What an angel!

“Huh!?” Mr. Fisalis said, pouting obviously.

“Huuuuuh~!? I wanna sit by Viola, too~!” Father Fisalis whined. Why, I don’t know.

“There’s not enough room! Come on, get in. There are people waiting behind us!”

“But—dear!”

“...Alright.”

Father Fisalis cried out in shock at his wife’s roar, while Mr. Fisalis reluctantly agreed; then, the both of them obediently climbed into the carriage.

Yep. Mother Fisalis definitely rules this family.

“Anyway. If you haven’t done anything wrong, there isn’t anything to be afraid of, now is there?”

On the road back, I sat across from Mr. Fisalis. Unlike sitting beside him, it meant that I had to take that frosty smile head on. I might’ve made a miscalculation sitting this way, but I couldn’t change the past.

Wait, weren’t we gonna talk when we got home? You’re gonna interrogate me here instead?

“I did absolutely nothing wrong! Miss Iris and the ladies all had their hearts set on one particular man, so I tried to change the subject to avoid a bloodbath!” *Forgive me for getting a bit sharp.*

“Hmmmm?” He hummed, staring straight at me.

“If four friends all got their hearts set on one guy, that would be awkward, wouldn’t it? I mean, yes, Corydalis is wonderful. He’s good at his job, and he’s charming. But they couldn’t ALL go for him! That’s why I tried to point out that there were a lot of other good men out there,” I continued.

“I see. So you think Corydalis is wonderful, huh?”

What? That’s all you got from that? And what’s with that gleam in your eyes, Mr. Fisalis?

“I mean, in a *general* sense, he’s wonderful... Ah.” Just as I tried to argue, I realized my mistake. *Oh my god...*

“Okay. I’m banning Corydalis from the manor.”

“That’s not what I meant~!” *This guy is such a pain!* “I hate it

when men make snap decisions like that!" I was so pissed, I just said it outright.

"What!?" He must not have expected me to talk back, because his dark aura vanished, and he looked at me with his eyes wide.

I'm not done yet! "Were you even listening to me? That's what I was saying to Miss Iris and the girls. It was a mild, very generalized comment about how there were more fish in the sea! And *you* of all people should know how outstanding a guy Corydalis is!"

"Uh... I suppose..." Mr. Fisalis nodded obediently, overpowered by my ferocity.

You got it? Good.

Whew... That was refreshing☆ I really gave it to him! I wiped the sweat off my brow, satisfied.

"Oooh, Viola can really give it!"

"Yes, she can. But they're close enough to fight, as the saying goes!"

I realized my in-laws were watching, all smiles.

Oh no! We were off in our own little world, so I completely forgot they were there!

While I sat there, blushing furiously at their fond gazes, Mr. Fisalis gave them his usual sparkling smile.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

What's with that nonchalant apology to your parents!? Wait, now it looks like I'm the embarrassing one! Don't act like a good little boy now! It was your fault for bringing it up in the carriage ride home! If it'd been after we got home, I'm sure I could've managed to use Rohtas to get away... Oh, wait, that's not any good either.

Ahhh, I just want to crawl into a hole!

"I'm sorry..." I feebly apologized.

"There's nothing for you to apologize for, Vi. Cercis, Vi was right. Don't get all up in arms just because she said one nice thing about another man. It looks weak."

"...Gh!"

Mother Fisalis gave me a gentle smile, and told off her son with a single harsh glare.

You flinched, didn't you, Mr. Fisalis! You've gone silent. Nothing to say for yourself, huh?

Father Fisalis sat beside him, smiling wryly. He must have been remembering something.

Realizing he couldn't continue his cross-examination, Mr. Fisalis gave me a forced smile, which I answered with one of my twenty dollar ones.

Good—we've gotten that talk over for now! Just need to make it home and get away from him. But just as I was thinking that...

“Keep the jealousy to a minimum, Cercis.”

Mother Fisalis dropped another bombshell! Mr. Fisalis flinched as if he'd been stabbed, while I froze.

Jealous...!? Oh no... My face is getting hot again. I can't look at him anymore...

18 — We've Come So Far

The morning after the party. Mr. Fisalis left for work, while his parents were called to the castle by the King and Queen.

I'd stayed up so late socializing that I was still tired even the next day. But luckily, no one else was home!

"I'm just gonna relax today. Once I get some flowers from the greenhouse and decorate the manor, I'll have lunch outside since the weather is so nice. I might even take a nap, too! My garden would probably be the best for that, wouldn't it?" *The flowers are at their most beautiful right now, and no one can get in my way there!*

"Sometimes it's good to do things like that. I'll have everything prepared."

"Thanks, Stellaria. Please do. Mimosa and I will head to the greenhouse!"

"Alright."

"Let's get going~!"

With my day planned out, I headed to the greenhouse with Mimosa. And just like always, we got some beautiful flowers from Bellis and decorated the manor, the cottage, and my own room. *Fresh flowers are the best! They make you feel so much better.* Even though decorating with flowers was a simple job, it took a lot of time to get to each of the important rooms in our huge manor!

Once we finished and headed towards my garden, we found Stellaria had already finished her preparations there. We must've taken longer than I thought. A fluffy blanket lay on the grass covered with tons of pillows, all under a parasol to keep the sun off my face. It was definitely somewhere I could relax!

The andreanums I'd planted with Mr. Fisalis a while ago were growing wonderfully. I'd been a bit worried about how they would take to the climate and temperature, but it looked like they were doing fine.

"I was so shocked at the party last night. Miss Verbena went from super-fancy to all natural."

"That is the trend now, after all. Since the Argenteias' daughter is so tuned in to the latest fashions, she was probably one of the first adopters of the new style."

"I see~"

Bellis brought lunch to us from the manor, and the four of us ate

it together. Then we chatted about the party and the flowers; when I got sleepy, I took a nice nap. It was a pretty calm day for me!

Thanks to that, my fatigue is gone! I'll be able to work tomorrow☆

Mr. Fisalis and my in-laws came home in the evening. I was all rested up from spending the day relaxing, so I greeted them all cheerfully.

"I'm home. You look happy today."

"Yep! I spent some time taking it easy!"

"You were exhausted last night, so I'm glad. And you being in a good mood makes me feel less exhausted, too."

"Oh, Mr. Fisalis~"

He smiled at me. *Now I've gotta give him my twenty dollar smile back!*

While we were smiling at each other:

"Ehem. Don't forget *we're* here, too," Father Fisalis popped in with a forced cough, reminding me of their existence. *I'd completely forgotten!*

"Welcome back, Father and Mother Fisalis!"

"I'm glad you two are so close! Just watching you cheers me up!"

"Ah, ahahahaha..."

"Ufufufu! But changing the subject. It's sudden, but we're being called to the palace tomorrow."

She's saying it like it's sudden, but you were just there today, weren't you? It's not sudden if you go every day.

Seeing my blank look, she clarified, "I don't mean just me, but *us*—you and I, Vi! The princesses want to talk to you. They want you to come for tea tomorrow."

"What, me!?"

That really was sudden! The *PRINCESSES*! I'd only ever seen people that high up from afar. How was I supposed to have *tea* with them!? And *TOMORROW*? *I mean, yes, I'm not doing anything special, but there's cleaning and laundry I want to get done! And wait, are palace tea parties always decided the day before!?*

Since I was so flustered, Mr. Fisalis asked the obvious question for me. "That is quite sudden. Is something the matter?"

"They'd heard about the party last night and were all saying how much they wanted to see you and the sapphires. They actually burst into my tea with the Queen to ask me directly."

So the princesses went straight to Mother Fisalis to ask, and this is all about the sapphires, too. Doesn't look like I can get out of this one.

I looked up at Mr. Fisalis hesitantly, but he just gave me a little forced smile back.

"...I have nothing planned, so that should be fine." My reaction was a bit delayed, but I'm proud that I managed to respond so well.

“It is a tea party with the princesses, but since it’s private, you shouldn’t go all out. How about a dark blue to match the sapphires? Ah, why not wear the dress you wore to the repatriation ceremony? It’s tidy, dark blue, and the design is gorgeous. It should work perfectly.”

As per Stellaria’s suggestions, my dark blue dress made another appearance.

Since she thought it might be hard for me to go to the palace alone, my goddess of a mother-in-law was accompanying me.

My stomach started churning before we left, so I called for Dahlia, asking for the usual medicine.

“Alright. Take one dose with you.”

“Thank you!”

And then my stomach medicine made another appearance, too.

The garden where they’d held that farewell party at the beginning of the war was now being used as a picnic space. The trees had all been trimmed, the roses grown into arches, and despite how elaborate everything was, it all still seemed quite natural. It was truly a calming, healing garden. *So this is what the palace is like!* I was astonished, since it was my first time there.

We sat down first, and then Her Majesty and the princesses came out to see us. I was so nervous, since it was the first time I’d ever seen them up close! But since I couldn’t afford to make any mistakes, I pumped myself up.

The first princess, Artemisia, was twenty. The second princess, Elettaria, was eighteen. The youngest princess, Myristica, was sixteen. And, though he wasn’t here, their much younger brother, Dianthus, the Crown Prince, was only five. *I’m doing good! That much is basic knowledge for any citizen!*

Dredging up their names and ages from the depths of my brain, I tried matching them to the faces before me. I’d only ever seen them from afar, but I knew... I thought I knew, at least.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Viola,” I said, standing to give a nervous lady’s greeting.

“We know! Since we’re in private, don’t worry about all that uptight stuff!”

“Can I call you Viola?”

“What do people call you as a nickname? Vi? How cute!”

I was shocked by how friendly the princesses were all of a sudden. I’d only ever seen them sitting with perfect composure, so I’d been a bit afraid. I mean, beautiful people look kind of cold when they’re being all prim and proper, don’t they? But they were so cute when they smiled.

No, no. No matter how friendly they are, and how private a setting this

is, of course I'm gonna be nervous meeting actual princesses. And this is our first meeting, too! Mother Fisalis, save meeee~!

I looked to my mother-in-law for help, but...

"Don't worry~! All the princesses are delightful girls."

"That's right. Please make friends with them."

Not just Mother Fisalis, but even Her Majesty encouraged me.

That wasn't what I wanted, but...! "Thank you very much..." *I'll just try to make the best of it, I guess...*

"We've finally met you. Tell us aaaaaall about it today!"

"About what?"

"The sapphires, and the duke—just, everything!"

"Ah~ Hahaha... Okay..."

Since it was just us, these very much not prim and proper princesses were extremely direct.

Once we had sat down and our tea had been served, the chats began. And of course, the first topic was the sapphires.

"Are these the sapphires everyone is talking about?"

"Yes."

"They're called 'Viola Sapphires,' right?"

"...Yes."

They were all staring at my necklace. They looked from the necklace, to the earrings, and then to my eyes. Having three beautiful girls who took after their mother staring at my chest... It was surreal. And incredibly embarrassing. I'd never had anyone stare so obviously at my chest before!

And I knew exactly why they were looking at both the sapphires and my eyes. *I know! My eyes aren't nearly as pretty a color as these sapphires. Mr. Fisalis named them, not me! I objected! Ahhhh, I just wanna crawl into a hole somewhere!*

"'Viola Sapphires' is such a wonderful name. Why, they really do look exactly like your eyes," the first princess said with a sigh. *Wait, does she have some sort of vision problem!?*

"I'd love to get one for myself the moment you produce a few more."

"Um, I'm sure we will. I'll let my husband know."

I made a little mental note that any new sapphires should go right to the princesses. *I have to tell Rohtas when I get home. Huh? Of course I'd go to Rohtas rather than Mr. Fisalis!*

"So, did you marry the duke for love?"

"No."

"So it was a political marriage?"

"Of a sort..."

"Wow! How did you get him to fall in love with you so deeply, if it was just a political match?"

Since we were finished talking about the sapphires, the first princess changed the topic. And she went right into the difficult questions, too! Technically, it was more of a straight up contractual marriage than a political one. But the details didn't matter, since I couldn't really exactly tell them about all of that. Whatever you called it, there wasn't a sliver of love to be found in there.

But how did it get to Mr. Fisalis being called a devoted husband? Everywhere I went, people were telling me he loved me, or that he treasured me. *I'm* the one who wants to know why he loves me so much! What happened to all those rules we laid out?

How did I get him to love me so much? I didn't do anything. I just did as my contract specified, hiding away in the manor and enjoying my servant—or rather, my lady of the house life.

“Um, I'm really not sure what it was...”

“Hmm, so you did it without even thinking about it, huh? It's gotta be about what's on the *inside*, then. Have you been improving yourself?”

Improving myself? I've improved at sweeping and window washing, but... “I haven't really been doing anything special, no.”

“What do you normally do at home?”

Great... Now the second princess is coming in with hard questions, too!

Back at the manor, I clean, do laundry, and play around in my garden. I work alongside the servants. Ah, but lately I've been dashing through the halls all dressed up, or learning martial arts, knife play, escaping ropes, and picking locks more than anything. But there's no way I can tell them that.

Oh—since it's all orchestrated by Rohtas, maybe I could just say I've been studying lately? No, no, wait. Studying is something I should've been done with ages ago. I can't admit I'm only getting around to it now.

“—Hmm, well, I putter around the house,” I answered, coming up with and rejecting a few other things before settling on a safe answer.

“What do you mean, putter around the house?”

Of course! Of course, they had to pry just when I thought I'd successfully evaded the question!

“Um, I like flowers, so I decorate the manor with them. And... I give instructions to the servants.”

“Do you manage anything in the duchy?”

“I leave all of that to my husband. Mainly, I just take care of things at home.”

Fufufu. I did a good job, there! I sure do take care of things at home. I like flowers, so I don't just decorate with them, but grow some myself! And I don't really give the servants any orders, but instead get orders from them (for cleaning and laundry). And I plan out our meal menu with Cartham in the kitchen. That counts!

The princesses all looked impressed.

"I thought most noblewomen just went to tea parties, held evening parties, and played around," the third princess said, surprised, but I was more surprised at her idea of what noblewomen were like.

That's just some noblewomen, not all! At least, not the poor ones! Or wait, I'm a high-class noblewoman now, aren't I?

"Um... I'm not very good with those kinds of things..." I tried to brush it off with a smile. *And by "not very good," I mean "terrible."*

Then...

"I see. So you keep busy at home."

"Socializing isn't all there is to it, huh?"

"That delicacy of hers must make him want to protect her."

All three princesses seemed to have gotten the same idea. What that idea *was*, I couldn't say. And just who here was "delicate", anyway? I really didn't understand anything, personally, but I forced a smile anyway.

"We'll all end up in strictly political marriages, after all. We want to be happy too, so we thought maybe you could teach us a few things about how to make your husband fall in love with you."

"Since you're so popular in high society and all!"

"Even Mother told us to look at you and learn how to be *real* ladies."

So that's why they were asking me all of those questions. And the queen must have meant look at me for what NOT to do! I fought back the urge to give them a wry smile.

But I managed to keep my socializing face on! I just kept saying "yes" and "oh my" every once in a while, and asked for more info when things felt right, and I didn't forget to change the subject a few times☆

While I listened to them talk, I drank my tea and enjoyed their delicious sweets. Cartham's sweets are delicious, but the palace chefs used different recipes, and they were delicious. *I should get the recipe...*

Just as I thought more about the sweets, the first princess asked me a question after watching me drink my tea. "You move beautifully. Did you have a special teacher?"

"Not quite a teacher but, yes. She's very strict."

And she wasn't a fancy tutor, but a maid.

Next, the second princess asked, "You're great at dancing too. Do you have a teacher for that, as well?"

"Yes, kind of. He's INCREDIBLY strict." *I'm sorry for putting so much emphasis on the 'incredibly' part.*

"So lessons work better if they're really challenging..." Both the first and second princesses heaved big sighs.

"The lessons are hard, but if you work hard too, you'll build up

your confidence!" I rushed to comfort the withering princesses.

"I see," they nodded deeply. *I'm glad I could help!*

"So you can't just focus on looks."

"The point is to be dependable, but still show a little bit of vulnerability."

"Is that the 'gap' everyone thinks is so charming?"

"I'm so glad we got to talk to you today, Viola."

"Really?"

"Yes, it was very helpful!"

"I can see why Mother told us to learn how to be ladies from you!"

"That's..." *Way too much praise!*

When I rushed to deny it, they just said my humble side was great too. There was nothing I could do.

They kept getting rowdier and even asked me to stay for dinner, but for some reason Mr. Fisalis came swooping in to refuse on my behalf and put an end to things.

"You want your wifey back, Duke?" teased the first princess.

"Yes, I do," he replied with a refreshing smile. *Please, at least have a bit of shame! Look at how the princesses are grinning at us now!*

When we said goodbye, all three of them started miming wolf whistles behind the queen's back (since they'd get in trouble for being vulgar if she saw, of course☆).

To think that an average poor noble girl like me would become friends with princesses. I never could have imagined it just a few short years ago. I've come really far.

◆◆◆Idle Asides, No. 3 — A Pain-in-the-Ass Letter◆◆◆

While Viola was called to the palace to have tea with the princesses:

In a meeting room deep within the palace, the Royal Council was being held. It was a sudden meeting, spurred by an official letter from the King of Aurantia.

It had been a month since the war had ended, but since all of their postwar business had been wrapped up and the two nations didn't really want to interact, Flür had been fine with just watching them and leaving things as they were. But...

Morning, in the King's office.

Since he didn't have any meetings or inspections that day, His Majesty was simply relaxing before going out to perform his usual duties. But then, a knock rang out, and Prime Minister Argenteia popped his head in.

"Please forgive me for barging in on Your Majesty. I've brought an official letter from Aurantia," he announced, walking into the office and standing on the other side of the King's desk.

"Do they need something?"

"I don't know. It was very sudden. Our intelligence has reported no particular problems. I was going to ask the messenger what it was about, but he rushed out before I could, so I know nothing," the prime minister continued, holding out a single sealed letter.

Despite it being a very formal-seeming message from Aurantia, he was confused because they had no reason to send such a thing. And not only that, but the messenger had acted strange, so he'd rushed to bring the letter to the King.

"Well, I'll give it a look," the King said, taking the sealed envelope.

"Yes."

He read through the message suspiciously, and the further he got, the more his brow furrowed.

The prime minister watched, puzzled. "Is something the matter? Did they write something insulting?"

"Hmmmm. It would probably be a good idea to have everyone read this. I can't make this decision alone."

"What do you mean?"

“Read it for yourself.”

Prime Minister Argenteia took the letter and quickly skimmed through it. “...I see what you mean. They don’t seem to have reflected much. They lack common sense,” he said, rubbing his temples.

“Let’s call a meeting and discuss what to do.”

“As you wish. We’ll be calling *him* as well, correct?”

“Of course.”

And so, the senior statesmen were called for an emergency Royal Council meeting.

As the palace’s meeting room filled, it buzzed with conversation. What could the letter from Aurantia have said?

The meeting began with Prime Minister Argenteia reading the letter aloud. Basically, it said this:

“As a show of friendship with Flür, we would like for our princess to marry a man of suitable stature. We would also like for you to send us a woman of suitable stature to become our crown princess.”

“Shouldn’t they apologize first? Nothing about that?”

“I can see why they’d send their princess here as a hostage, but why would we send a hostage back for them as well?”

“Our country has no need for any political ties to Aurantia. That’s why we’ve never brought up the idea of intermarriage. They really don’t get it, do they?”

While the statesmen continued chattering, His Majesty stopped them with a raised hand. “Since they’re more or less saying they want to keep an amicable relationship, I think it would be best to accept and have one of my three daughters become their crown princess. The problem is—who will marry Aurantia’s princess.”

“Did they specify someone in the message?” One of the statesmen spoke up.

“That’s it...” The King’s features darkened as he said it, and the room buzzed once more.

“The letter continued. ...They want their princess to marry Duke Fisalis,” Prime Minister Argenteia answered with a wry smile.

“HUHHH!?” Cercis forgot that he was in a Royal Council meeting and screeched hysterically.

“According to the letter, yes. You were at Aurantia’s palace after the war, correct? Apparently, the princess saw you and fell in love at first sight. But they don’t seem to be aware that you’re already married.”

“That’s idiotic!”

The prime minister explained in simple terms, but aside from Cercis’s impulsive retort, the rest of the statesmen sat there in stunned silence. An uncomfortable hush fell over the meeting room.

While Cercis raged on, the statesman launched into a tirade

against Aurantia.

"I understand that they might want to give us their princess because they lost the war, but why should they get to choose who she marries?"

"And on top of wanting to choose, they're essentially asking for a hostage to be married to their crown prince. Do they even realize they lost?"

The King stopped the conversation once again. "If he was to marry the princess, she would have to be his legal wife. But the duke is *already* married. He would have to make his current wife his concubine—"

"NO," Cercis interrupted, his voice so cold it was below freezing.

"I know, I understand! I understand that you can't do that! I was just about to say we *couldn't* do that!" His Majesty continued, flustered, while the duke gave him an icy smile.

"That's right. Everyone in Flür knows how close you two are."

"We're all against ripping you away from your beloved wife!"

The statesmen spoke out to try to comfort Cercis.

"Right? Thank you all!" This time, he gave them a heartfelt smile.

The King looked on blankly, but it was obvious that everyone was unanimously against the princess and Cercis marrying.

"It was out of the question from the beginning."

"That's right."

"I vote against marrying the duke off."

"Of course. Ah, but would I be able to see the letter for a moment?"

"Alright," said the King, handing Cercis the message.

The duke took it and read the contents. It really *did* say that they wanted to marry him off to the princess.

"Ridiculous." With a smile on his face but absolutely none in his eyes, he moved to rip the letter in half.

"Wait! That's still technically a very important official letter! Don't rip it—just leave it!" Celosia screeched, rushing to snatch the letter from him.

"Let's send a reply refusing the marriage between their princess and Duke Fisalis at once."

And with the King's final words, the matter was dropped.

"But who will we offer in exchange?" the Prime Minister asked.

Since they'd decided on turning down the marriage request to Cercis and it wouldn't be diplomatic to just refuse outright, they had to give an alternative option.

"Hmmm... Our crown prince is only five. We might be able to make an engagement work... How old is the princess?"

"Princess Orangé is twenty years old," replied Celosia

immediately.

“Twenty! It might have worked the other way around, but that’s far too big a gap for us!” The statesmen all argued.

“If they were engaged, she would be thirty by the time the prince comes of age. She’ll be much too old to give him an heir at that rate. Although we could just hope one of his concubines gives birth to one...”

They all went silent at the prime minister’s words.

“Let’s just keep looking for a suitable partner.”

“That’s right. If I don’t turn this down, Duke Fisalis will kill me—”

“I’ll do what?”

Smile.

The King’s face twitched at Cercis’s icy smile. There was nothing worse for the heart than a cold smile from an attractive person. His Majesty didn’t want to make an enemy of the duke now that he was showing his worth after getting married... The thought was terrifying. A cold sweat ran down his back.

“Oh, no. We wouldn’t want their princess to keep thinking she could marry you, after all! We’ve gotta crush that dream right from the start! Aha, ahahaha!” he quickly blurted out, wiping the cold sweat from his brow.

“Yes, let’s! Please, send your reply with one of my subordinates. They’ll get there much faster than a normal messenger.”

“Alright. I’ll leave that to you.”

“Please get to writing that letter, Your Majesty. As fast as you can. I’ll find a messenger while you do.”

“Leave it to me!”

Paying no more heed to the other statesmen, Cercis and the King finalized their plans. Since the answer had been unanimously against the proposal, the others just watched it happen.

Cercis left the meeting room and headed to the Knight’s post, putting out a hasty call for Corydalís. When said knight came to his office, he saw Cercis sitting at his desk with a peevish look on his face. Past experience told him that nothing good could come of this.

“What’s up?”

“I’ll get straight to the point. Deliver a letter from His Majesty to Aurantia.”

“What?” Corydalís stared back blankly at Cercis’s frank request.

Normally, official letters from the King would be delivered by special messengers, since they were top secret and usually dealt with delicate matters. It wasn’t a job for the Royal Guard. So why was he asking...?

Corydalís’s clever mind worked in an instant, and his face tightened. “Since you want me to be the messenger, I’m guessing that

something annoyi— Ahem, *difficult* has come up, hasn't it?" he retorted.

"Not annoying. Aurantia wants me to marry their princess."

"Huh? You, marrying the princess? ...Do they know you're already married?"

"Probably not. I didn't bring up any private information in my dealings with them. I didn't even speak with them except on official business. I've never even had a conversation with this princess of theirs."

Cercis thought back to his days at Aurantia's palace while dealing with postwar matters.

I hadn't spoken much to anyone, much less flattered anybody. I have no idea why they'd ask for me by name. And their princess was... that, right? Small and blobby... She kept hanging around wherever I was. I'd tried to subtly brush her off and tell her she was in the way, but subtlety didn't work. I ended up telling her to get lost to her face before she took the hint. She couldn't read the situation at all.

While he could recall a vague blob when he thought of the princess, he couldn't bring to mind any details. That was how little attention he'd paid to her.

Corydalis was the same. He'd mostly dealt with clerical staff and their Minister of War in postwar dealings, so he couldn't remember ever speaking to her.

"Right. Does your wife know about this?"

"I only just learned at the council meeting, so Viola shouldn't know anything yet. And I'm not telling her either, since I turned it down immediately. The King is writing a rejection letter as we speak."

"I see."

"Dammit... Why is Viola at the palace today of all days... I hope no one says anything unnecessary to her..." Cercis said, going pale.

"Oh, so she's at the palace today? That's unusual."

"The princesses invited her to a tea party."

The duke kept swearing, muttering, "Why today, dammit!" Then, "I don't want Viola knowing *anything about* this, so don't tell her."

"Why?"

"She'd probably tell me it would be best to divorce her and marry the princess..." Cercis held his head in his hands. He didn't want her to know because he was terrified of her saying that one word.

"Ah..." Corydalis gave him a pitying look.



“That is why! I want *you*, who know both Viola and I very well, to go down and tell them that I have a wife whom I love *very much* and thus will *N E V E R* marry their princess. I couldn’t trust a regular messenger with saying all of that, but you should be fine! I have faith in you!” Cercis looked up quickly, as if shaking off Corydalis’s gaze, and told him exactly why he’d chosen him. He grabbed his arms and started shaking him back and forth.

“Hey, don’t shake me like that! You’re scrambling my brains! Ah, um... I understand, though. I’ll do my best for the sake of you and your wife’s happiness.”

“I’ll leave it to you!”

And so, Corydalis agreed to be the messenger, taken in by Cercis’s might.

A few hours later, he set off on horseback at an unprecedented speed to deliver the King’s reply of “NO WAY!”

And as for Cercis...

He managed to get Viola out of the palace before anyone said anything unnecessary.

19 — Incoming Visitors from Our Southern Neighbors

“It looks like work is going to be busy for a while. I’ll be coming home late a lot. I might even have to stay all night once in a while.”

One night, after my tea party at the palace...

While we were eating dinner in the dining room as usual, Mr. Fisalis said all that with an unusually meek look on his face. Things were finally dying down after his transfer, so there must have been something really big coming up.

“Alright.”

“The truth is, the crown prince of Aurantia, the country down south of us, is paying us a visit.”

“Oh my!”

I had intentionally not asked for details because his previous post involved a lot of classified intel, but he gave me them anyway. He was really skirting the limit of what he could tell me here. That incident where I thought he might have had a mistress must’ve struck home.

But the country down south, huh? I haven’t heard anything about them since the war ended. Actually, this might be the first time I’ve ever heard the country’s actual name.

“Apparently, he wants to hold a ceremony to celebrate the end of the war and discuss how things will be going forward, so the palace is in a rush to get ready.”

Security and stuff must be tough when someone from a different country is coming to visit. Since Mr. Fisalis is *kind of* in the Royal Guard, I imagined he’d probably be busy with planning and giving directions.

But wait, didn’t he tell me his new station would involve doing mostly the same thing as his old one? Is he really just the security detail?

“Will you be on guard duty too?”

His Special Ops position was a leadership role, wasn’t it? Although I didn’t know if it’d be the same thing this time or not.

“No, mainly I’m going to be giving orders in the Captain’s place. When he’s out in public, I’ll be back giving directions. When he’s present, I’ll be in public, guarding His Majesty. That’s about it.”

Oh, so he really is going to be guarding people out in public. So that’s about it—I understand now.

“Sounds like it’ll be tough. Please take care of yourself.”

“I hate that it means that I won’t have time to relax with you for a while, but I can’t do anything about it. I’ll do my best to get some time off ASAP.”

“You *REALLY* don’t need to rush!! And what would you even do to get off work early!?”

Mr. Fisalis, please stop randomly spouting nonsense.

The next morning he really was busy, just like he’d said. I barely ever saw him in the manor.

“Master told me that he would be late, and that you should not wait up for him.”

“Kaaaay. Wait, then tonight...”

“...You can eat your dinner in the servants’ dining hall.”

“Woo! It’s been so long!”

And after having that conversation with Rohtas one night...

“Master has already eaten and left for the palace.”

“Oh, okay. Then I can have my breakfast in the servant’s...”

“Your in-laws are still staying in the cottage, so you cannot.”

“Sniffle...” I tried turning on the crocodile tears, but...

“Those are too obvious. The answer is still no.”

“Damn.” *Didn’t work on him, huh?*

My days of having that same conversation with the servants every morning continued.

And it wasn’t just Mr. Fisalis who was busy—my in-laws were too. Father Fisalis often received a summons from the king and was hauled off to the palace. It was always the same chamberlain abducting him with a smile. Mother Fisalis occasionally accompanied them, but she was also often invited to tea.

I was the only one acting like everything was normal... No one was *making* me do anything, but it still felt uncomfortable. Was it really alright for me to be carrying on like nothing has changed?

But there still wasn’t a good reason for me to suddenly start participating in high society, so I did what I *could* do! Which was, of course, doing my best at cleaning and doing the laundry.

Vi, the lowly maid, wearing her uniform with her hair in braids, has been hard at work since the morning!

“It’s my job as Mr. Fisalis’s wife to keep the atmosphere comfortable so he can relax a little when he comes home exhausted! The flowers are beautiful today, aren’t they? Just looking at them makes me feel better.”

“Madam...”

“Hm? What’s wrong, Dahlia?”

“Nothing.”

Why are you wiping the tears from your eyes? Did I say something weird?

Really, I was much more at ease without Mr. Fisalis and my in-laws at home.

And so, while I was back to living like I used to right after getting married, an invitation for tea from Miss Verbena arrived.

“Wow, she actually *did* invite me. I thought she was just being polite.” *I mean, yes, she did say she’d invite me, but I didn’t take her seriously. I also didn’t think an invitation would show up so quickly.*

“The event will be held the day after tomorrow,” Rohtas confirmed.

“Alright. Kind of sudden, but it’s not like I have any plans, so... any time is fine.”

I might be free time-wise, but I’d need to be prepared. I was nervous, since it was my first time having a tea party at someone else’s home.

Wait! But what if all of the other guests are people I don’t know!?

Just when I was starting to get a bit gloomy about who could be there, Rohtas immediately reassured me. “In addition to you, all of the other guests are ladies that you are familiar with, like Lady Sanguinneah and Lady Nastersham.”

Did he read my mind!? Well, that’s fine. Thank goodness I’ll know everyone. “That’s wonderful! I was wondering what I would do if I didn’t know anyone.”

Good job, Miss Verbena! I was relieved that the guest list was so friendly to me. This wasn’t really something to brag about, but I could count the people I knew on one hand. *Fufufu!*

The day of the tea party.

In the carriage on the way to the Argenteia manor, I was worrying about whether I’d be able to understand what Miss Verbena was trying to say or if I’d put my foot in my mouth. Celosia wouldn’t be there to translate, after all.

As I worried and fidgeted all by myself, we pulled up to the Argenteia manor. There to greet me were the servants and... Miss Verbena herself!? *Wait, the daughter of a duke is coming to greet me!? I’m so sorry!*

“Thank you ever so much for inviting me today, Miss Argenteia,” I said, giving a lady’s greeting to Miss Verbena for coming all the way to welcome me.

“Oh, you don’t have to address me so formally. Just Verbena is fine. I’ll be calling you Miss Viola, anyway,” she replied immediately.

Woo, I understood her without Celosia’s translation!

...That’s not something I should be excited about, right?

She had a slightly stiff smile, just as usual. She was looking away and blushing a bit... Was she embarrassed? But she’s trying so hard!

I was so happy.

“Alright, Miss Verbena!” I said with the best smile I could muster. Really, I wanted her to call me Vi, but that was probably aiming a little high.

As she showed me to my seat, I saw that Miss Iris and the others were already there, chatting about the gardens. The weather was wonderful today—just right for a tea party. A pleasant breeze blew through the seats set up in the garden, while the river sparkled brightly—a completely different color than it was at night. Now that I thought about it, this was the first time I’d been there during the day.

Miss Verbena, Miss Iris, Miss Nastersham, Miss Krokusse, Miss Columbine, and myself sat around the table. Just having everyone there was comforting.

“Good day to you, Miss Iris, everyone.”

“Good day to you too, Miss Viola. Thank goodness the weather is nice today.”

“Really!”

Once Miss Verbena and I sat down, the tea and sweets were brought out. The treats from the palace chefs were really good, so I was excited to see what we’d have here today. *Ah, I already took my usual medicine, of course!*

“I had them brew up some foreign tea that we just received the other day. Please enjoy,” said Miss Verbena, offering us some unusual green-colored tea.

I’ve never seen tea like this! It’s such a pretty jade color! I wonder where it came from? This is a first~

While I was inwardly squealing about the color and smell of my first cup...

“Oh, this is that rare ‘green tea,’ isn’t it? Of *course* the Argenteia family managed to get some for us!”

“The balance between tart and sweet sure is addictive, isn’t it?”

“We purchased it from a merchant who visited Rozhe recently.”

Gotta hand it to the first-class aristocrats here—they already knew about this tea and are having a lively chat about it. But I see... so this is called green tea. Okay, got that memorized. I’ll bring it up with Rohtas when I get home.

Oh, since this was actually my first time ever drinking green tea, I just listened and nodded along, of course.

The sudden appearance of the unusual tea was exactly what we needed. The atmosphere was relaxed, and after that we chatted about the weather, trends in Rozhe’s high society, our outfits, all kinds of things. Then, the topic turned to the party the other day.

“The evening party here a few days ago was quite enjoyable.”

“So many young people came, after all.”

“Were you able to meet anyone?”

“Ugh, it’s really hard to do. I’m so jealous of you, Miss Viola.”

The ladies all asked each other about their encounters.

Oh, that’s right. I’m the only one here who’s married. “Aha~

Hahaha...” *I’ll just give them a non-committal smile, here!*

“Sir Corydalis Pulcherrima was wonderful, wasn’t he~”

“He’s good at his job, and he’s not exactly *less* attractive than Duke Fisalis, isn’t he?”

“Oh, but Miss Nastersham’s younger brother was wonderful as well.”

“Huh? My brother? Hmm, you really think so?”

And so on. As the girls’ talk about attractive men went on...

“Speaking of men, it seems that the crown prince of Aurantia will be paying us a visit soon,” said Miss Verbena casually. *The prime minister’s daughter sure knows her stuff!*

“It seems so, yes.”

“The palace and the knights have all been incredibly busy, too.”

“I’d heard that it was both the crown prince *and* the princess coming.”

“When are they arriving? Um...”

Miss Iris and the ladies all have pretty normal answers. Hm? Do they all know about the Aurantians coming? Since I’d heard it straight from Mr. Fisalis, I’d thought it was some kind of top secret thing. I didn’t want to risk saying something I shouldn’t, so I just sat back and listened.

Watching our reactions, Miss Verbena continued, “My older brother told me that their princess is marrying into Flür, to celebrate the end of the war and as proof of our countries’ friendship. But our crown prince is only five years old, while their princess is twenty. Since the age gap is too large, she’ll be marrying an appropriate highly ranked noble.”

She got her info from her brother, huh. She really knows a lot. Mr. Fisalis had only told me the crown prince was here to hold a commemorative ceremony for the end of the war and to talk about the future, so this was all news to me.

“That’s true. Our crown prince is the only male in the royal family at the moment.”

“Then who will she marry?”

The others must not have known either, because they were all surprised too. They brought up names, discussing who would or wouldn’t be appropriate.

“Duke Fisalis would be the likeliest groom, but he already has his lovely wife, Miss Viola, so he’s absolutely out of the question. Which would leave Sir Celosia, wouldn’t it? Sir Calatheas already has a fiancée, after all,” said Miss Iris, looking at Miss Verbena.

“Calatheas is the heir, after all. But it’s also possible their engagement could be annulled, since they aren’t married yet,” responded Miss Verbena nonchalantly, sipping her tea.

Wait, that feels like the ugly side of politics, y’know? And the others are all nodding in understanding... I feel like I’ve gotten a good look at what the aristocracy is really like. Uwah, scary~! Top-class nobility is terrifying! Since I’d never been familiar with the political side of things, I was kind of put off.

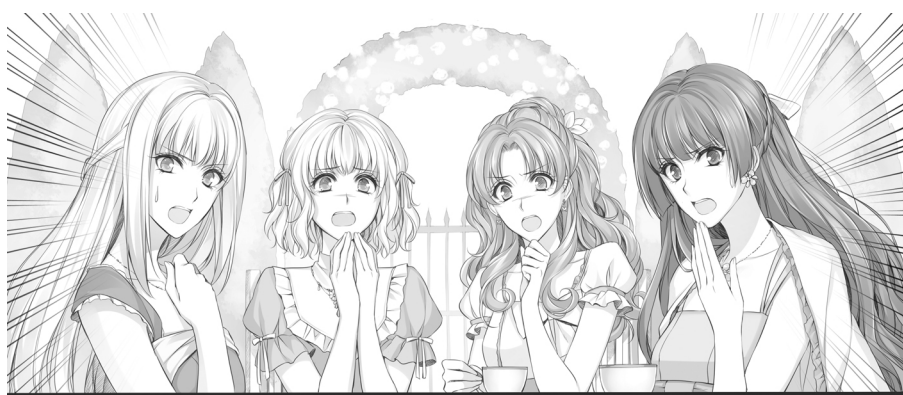
“Luckily, my brother Celosia has no fiancée, so I’m thinking he’ll be chosen. His Majesty wouldn’t be so cruel as to break someone’s engagement off for a political marriage,” she corrected herself.

I didn’t really know His Majesty, so I just nodded along again. Secretly relieved to know that the king wasn’t one to give cruel orders, I lifted my teacup to my lips.

“Actually, the Aurantians had first wanted the princess to marry Duke Fisalis,” Miss Verbena said with a frown.

“Whaaaaat!?”

“Huh!?” I nearly spit my tea out in shock when she mentioned his name. I’d accidentally let out a really embarrassing yelp, too. *By Duke Fisalis, they mean my Mr. Fisalis, right!? I didn’t know anything about that! He never mentioned it!* I sat there, frozen, teacup still in hand.



“I mean, I know I brought him up as the ideal candidate, but I was just *saying* that. I didn’t know they really...” Miss Iris and the others were just as surprised as I was.

I looked confused, wondering why his name would have come up in marriage talks.

“The message said that the princess had fallen in love with him at first sight during the post-war talks. It seems they didn’t know he was married.”

“That’s not surprising. He was there for work, so he wouldn’t really announce that he was already married for no reason,” Miss Iris chimed in. The others nodded too.

I see. Marriage talks for Mr. Fisalis, huh? And with a princess from another country?

During the lull in conversation:

Clink.

The tiny click of porcelain on porcelain rang out. In my shock, I’d made a sound putting my teacup back on the saucer.

Oh no, that was rude. I need to stay calm and composed at all times! I’m okay! I’m not shaking!

It was a small sound, but everyone realized at once, looking at me.

“You didn’t know, Miss Viola...?” Miss Verbena looked up at me awkwardly.

“Ah, no, I didn’t. Mr. Fisalis has been so busy with work, I haven’t seen him much.” *Oh no, I feel even more humiliated now that they’re all worried! Mr. Fisalis, you need to tell me important things like this! If Miss Verbena could just let it slip at a private tea party, it can’t be that much of a secret, right? It’s not like you haven’t nearly leaked a whole bunch of other classified stuff! This is much more important! Is it because you didn’t want to tell me you wanted a divorce? Did you want to marry a foreign princess instead after confessing to me like that?*

I put on a smile that would have looked stiff from a mile away.

“Miss Viola, you’ve gone pale. Are you alright?” Miss Krokusse asked worriedly.

I’m smiling! This is a smile, right? “I-I’m absolutely fine! Ohohoho!” I tried laughing this time.

“Your laugh sounds so strained! You don’t have to force yourself to smile!” Miss Columbine said, stopping me.

The tea party’s friendly mood had turned awkward.

Oh no. This is my fault, isn’t it? I need to laugh it off like I’m okay!

...Ah, but they just saw through my fake smile. I panicked, not able to take it anymore.

“I-It’s fine, though! I was told that His Majesty immediately rejected the idea, and Duke Fisalis tried to rip up the letter! And His

Majesty even sent a rushed reply saying ‘Duke Fisalis is married, so you absolutely must marry someone else’ to Aurantia!” Miss Verbena frantically continued.

“It’s the *Duke* we’re talking about here! Even if His Majesty ordered it, he would *absolutely NEVER* divorce you!”

“That’s right! Instead, you two should show that princess how much you love each other!”

“If she sees how you two are together, she’ll understand that there’s no way she could get between you.”

“Let’s destroy her completely!”

The girls forcibly pumped themselves up to try to support me. *Though the last one there wasn’t exactly a peaceful plan...*

“No no no no no! Destroying her is a bit much! I’m fine, so please, calm down! And the idea was already rejected, right? The princess must have given up on him already.”

But Mr. Fisalis, you can’t go around ripping up important diplomatic messages! Everyone else stopped him though, right? That’s good!

No matter what happened, though, why didn’t he tell me about the marriage proposal? He hated the idea enough to try to destroy important documents, didn’t he? I wish I’d heard it straight from his mouth rather than someone else’s.

Did he keep it a secret because he felt guilty about something? What if despite everyone saying it would never happen, the proposal was actually going through on the sly? That’d definitely end in divorce.

I mean, in the beginning, we had a contract marriage with no feelings involved. But being with him and seeing his gentle side has really started making my heart race, so... I can’t exactly say I don’t feel anything anymore.

And back in Le Pied, I told him as much, didn’t I? Just that I loved him like family, of course, but he was still happy.

Ah! Maybe he thinks I’d tell him not to worry and to go marry her? Maybe he doesn’t trust me as much as I think he does?

Ah, geez, I don’t know what to think anymore. What’s gonna happen now?

To be continued

Side Story

[Mission: Get Some “Viola Sapphires”!]

In the break room in the Royal Guard’s station, Chamomile, Alkanna, and Angelica gathered close together, whispering with uncharacteristically serious expressions on their faces.

“I hear that the Fisalis Duchy is going to be selling ‘Viola Sapphires.’”

“With the highest quality ones being called ‘Viola Eyes,’ too.”

“And on top of that, they aren’t actually on the market yet.”

It seemed that they were talking about the “Viola Sapphires” that had debuted at the Argenteias’ evening party a little while earlier.

“My little brother said they were incredibly beautiful. Dammit, I wish I’d seen them too~! But the party was mostly for unmarried men, so a married woman like me couldn’t go...!” Angelica lamented, holding her lovely silver-haired and ponytailed head in her hands.

“Ah, so your little bro got called to the party. The whole thing was to find a partner for Lady Verbena, wasn’t it?”

“Your family has a barony, after all. He was one of the lucky candidates.”

Angelica glared at the two other smirking women. “My family isn’t suitable for a duke’s daughter, but he got an invitation nigh *demanding* his presence,” she said, sighing about how dukes’ daughters were a pain in the ass.

“Your brother is the prime minister’s secretary, isn’t he? He’s handsome and he does his job well, so the prime minister must’ve remembered him.”

“That’s all an act, though... But enough about my brother. Sapphires!” she screeched, realizing that the topic had changed to her brother rather than the original topic of Viola Sapphires.

“Oh, yeah!”

Chamomile and Alkanna grinned, trying to dodge the blame with a smile. Angelica glared at them bitterly before clearing her throat and getting back to the subject at hand.

“I’ve heard from the jeweler’s that those sapphires haven’t made it to Rozhe yet.”

“Pommier? Then what was Madam wearing to the reveal?”

“They had her jewelry made from already-unearthed samples specifically for the debut.”

“I see~” The two nodded at her explanation.

“But they’re gems Madam herself wore to the party, and they’re named ‘Viola Sapphires,’ at that. Once they get to Rozhe, they’ll be super hard to get,” Angelica said with a serious look, after stopping the other two women.

“That’s right. It’s not only young ladies who admire Madam wanting them, but greasy nobles looking to suck up to the duchy are gonna be going for them too,” Chamomile agreed, looking grim.

“I want to get them before they get really scarce just because some aristocrats start throwing money around to buy them all up!” declared Alkanna.

“Wait, shouldn’t you be wanting to get them first so you can show them off?” retorted Angelica.



Then...

“Basically, we want to get the ‘Viola Sapphires’ before anyone else does!” all three of them said in unison.

Dubbing their plan [Mission: Get the Viola Sapphires Before Anyone Else], the three women started discussing the difficult question of how they actually *could* get them before anyone else.

“Why don’t we just stake out the shops for when they get delivered?”

“And grab ’em as soon as they come in!”

“No, we don’t have that sort of time, do we?”

The women were all technically members of the Royal Guard, and since they were female knights, they mainly guarded the inner palace. And because there were very few female knights, their hours were tight and they had very little free time.

“Having the money but not the time really stings.”

“It really does. We’re getting paid a ton, but it just keeps piling up uselessly since we have no time to spend it.”

They sighed. Both their former Special Operations posting and their current Royal Guard postings paid kinda (no... *very*) well because of their uniqueness. As a result, the ladies were all pretty rich.

“Then let’s use *them*,” Alkanna said in a flash of inspiration.

“*They* have more free time than us, and there’s a ton of them. They’d be able to take turns and keep constant watch on the shops.”

“That’s a great idea! *They’re* good at this kind of thing, too!”

“And when the sapphires arrive, they can buy them in our names!”

They all nodded, pleased with their wonderful idea.

“Let’s go find and grab them! Oh, we still have some break time left. With how long it’ll take to explain, we’ll need to finish our manhunt by halfway through our break—by the time the ‘period bell’ rings, in other words. Once we find our prey, we capture them. Then, we’ll explain until the ‘hour bell’ rings at the end of our breaks. How about it?”

In the three women’s minds, the men of their section had become little more than their prey. And in order to hunt said prey, Chamomile quickly formulated a plan in her mind. She was as serious as she would be on an actual military mission.

There was still a bit of time until the bell to mark halfway through their break, but since they wanted to catch as many men as possible, they had no time to waste.

“Okay. Let’s go with that.”

Their eyes glinted. If any other knights saw them like this, they’d be shaking in fear.

And so, the three women went off to hunt... or rather, kidnap their former colleagues, and scattered to search the palace.

“Time to change guards.”

“Good work.”

Lantana was just switching places with the next guard for the king’s office, ready to take it easy for a bit. Since the ‘period bell’ hadn’t rung yet, he decided to head back to the station after a nice cup of tea in the palace cafeteria. He walked through the halls, but...

—“Halt, villain!” Feeling a terrifying presence behind him, he immediately drew his sword, standing ready.

“Don’t call me a villain! And don’t swing that dangerous thing around in here!” With the clang of metal on metal, someone blocked his sword. The person who lightly parried his blow while humming that they were in the palace was—

“Chamomile!”

“Whatever—it’s good that you sensed me behind you. I’ll praise you for that! Now, you’re on break, right? I’ll treat you to a cup of tea in the cafeteria!” she said with unsettling cheerfulness, grabbing Lantana’s arm and dragging him off.

“W-What’s up with you, all the sudden?”

“Oh my... is it so wrong that I want to treat my cute junior to a cup of tea?”

“No, it’s just that you’ve never done that before! You always make us pay...” he said, with a chill creeping up his spine.

“What did you just say?”

But one icy glare from Chamomile was enough to make him stop. “I didn’t say anything!”

After switching shifts guarding the prime minister’s office, Jean decided to take it easy in the break room rather than fighting his way through the busy cafeteria. Just as he’d left the palace and stepped onto the path to the station...

“Guah!?”

Someone wrapped their arms around his neck from behind, pinning him in a headlock. Turning his head a bit to make sure he could still breathe, he tried to see who had grabbed him.

“You’re too careless. Just because Rozhe is pretty safe doesn’t mean you can let your guard down,” the person behind him said, popping their face out from behind him.

“Alkanna!?”

“You’re slacking off. Do we need to do a little more hazing here?”

“No no no no no!”

Jean went white as Alkanna smiled.

“Whatever. Come to the station with me.”

“What~!? What are you gonna do to me? Will I survive it? Someone, help!”

“Oh, shut up and walk!”

By the time the “period bell” rang, six poor former spec ops men had been captured by the Bombshell Trio, just because they had happened to be on their breaks at the time (or even just starting them).

Thus.

“Keep watch for when the Viola Sapphires get to the shop, okay☆” ordered the Bombshell Trio.

And so, cowed by the women’s “request,” the men nodded, and were made to take shifts on their breaks or days off to stake out Pommier’s shop.

A few days later...

“I hear you’ve got the guys watching Pommier,” Cercis said, popping into the station’s break room while the Bombshell Trio were trying to relax a bit.

“Who squealed?”

“We’ll have to string the culprit up when we catch him.”

The women exchanged looks, whispering to each other.

“And I heard that you all want ‘Viola Sapphires,’” the Vice-Captain said with a sigh, giving them all a disgusted look.

“They’re *Madam’s* sapphires! Of course we want them! Immediately! As fast as possible!”

“If we wait too long, they’ll be all gone!”

“That’s right!”

The lady knights all lashed out at him.

“You’re all idiots. You’re going about this the wrong way! I can’t help but sigh... Well, whatever. Viola wants to see you, so come to the manor tonight.”

“Huh? Madam’s calling for us?”

“It’s been a while, huh?”

“I wonder what’s up?”

They were all confused as to what Viola might want with them.

“Also, let those guys off the hook from your demands. Alright?”

“Fiiiiiiiine.”

Leaving the three confused, Cercis turned and left.

That night, they followed him home to the Fisalis residence.

“Ladies, I’ve heard that you’d like some sapphires. I would have given you some as a gift if you’d just told me! Pommier has buyers lined up already, so I’ll give you some newly-mined ones. I know you’re in a hurry, but since they’re natural goods, I don’t know exactly when they’ll be available. Please, wait just a bit longer,” Viola told

them all with a big smile.

“So we should’ve asked you from the start—!?” the trio cried weakly, crestfallen.

By the way, the men who had been on stakeout duty were all given Le Pied handcrafted hairpieces, brooches, or bracelets made from smaller stones as presents.

A while later...

After waiting excitedly for their famed sapphires, Viola called the Bombshell Trio back to the Fisalis manor to pick them up. Having been waiting for this moment, the three happily rushed to the manor the instant their work was over. When they arrived, they were led to the salon by the maids.

“I apologize for making you wait. Master and Madam will be here soon, so please enjoy some tea while you wait. I’ll prepare it now.”

“Oh, don’t mind us!”

Since it seemed as if Viola and Cercis were entertaining other guests, a few maids started serving the ladies sweets and tea. The maids moved gracefully, never looking the least bit rushed, and soon the room was full of the scent of sugar and freshly brewed tea. A moment later, all three knights had a delightful array of treats available.

“They are currently entertaining the owner of Pommier. He arrived a short while ago to deliver the jewelry we had made for you knights.”

“What jewelry?”

The maid explained why the trio was waiting, possibly on orders from the duke and duchess, but her explanation only surprised the ladies. They looked at each other, wondering why they’d be getting any jewelry when they thought they were just getting the gems.

“Yes. It seemed that Madam felt it was wrong to only give you the gems themselves, and instead had them made into necklaces that won’t interfere with your work,” the maid explained further.

“Madam did all that?” Chamomile asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” the maid replied, nodding with a smile.

“Wow! Madam is so thoughtful!”

“And she had them made into necklaces so we can wear them on the job!”

“Wah! That’s so amazing!”

“Just giving us Viola Sapphires was generous enough, but commissioning jewelry for us on top of that!?”

“What should we do!?”

If they hadn’t been in the duke’s manor, the three women would’ve been writhing on the floor, absolutely overcome with love for Viola’s generosity once again.

“Madam is wonderful, isn’t she?” Angelica reflexively looked to the maids for agreement.

“Yes, she is! She’s so good-natured, and the pride of our duchy... Ah, please excuse me.”

“It’s fiiiine, don’t worry! We know exactly what you mean!”

The maid unintentionally answered the question casually before rushing to compose herself, but the Bombshell Trio laughed it off, not minding.

“Thank you,” she said, relieved that she hadn’t been scolded for acting in a manner unbecoming of a first-class servant. But that only lasted a moment.

“Besides, anyone would become a fan of hers after getting to know her even a little bit.”

“Yes, that’s absolutely right! You understand!” the maid reflexively agreed with Alkanna’s statement, before slapping a hand over her mouth.

“We totally get it!” the trio agreed, slapping their hands on the table and leaning over.

And so, little by little, they broke down the maids’ resistance.

“Not only is her face adorable, but she’s kind, and her conduct and thoughtfulness is wonderful, too.”

“And she’s sensible.”

“Ahh~ the list of her good points is neverending!”

The Bombshell Trio continued praising Viola.

“She actually puts incredible effort into things behind the scenes. It’s quite admirable,” said the maid, emphasizing how hard a worker Viola was.

“Oh, wow! Really?”

“Yes. Whether dance or manners, she tries her best day after day at difficult lessons without a single complaint.”

“Just what I’d expect from her!”

“That makes me think even better of Madam!”

“Me too~”

The three lady knights broke into smiles imagining her throwing herself into her dance lessons.

“And she doesn’t only think of herself! She changes all of the flowers decorating the manor every day! She picks whichever flowers are the most beautiful. Just looking at them heals us,” the maid who had prepared the snacks joined in, pointing out the flowers in the salon.

“Oh, those are lovely! Those ones, too?”

“Yes.”

“It isn’t just the flowers. Looking at Madam herself heals you, too.”

“Yes, that’s right!” The maid agreed excitedly, having found comrades who understood.

“I can see why the Vice-Captain fell so hard for her.”

“He’s completely in the realm of ‘doting.’”

The ladies started smirking again, remembering Cercis waiting on Viola.

“Yes. Master’s overprotectiveness increases daily,” another maid joined in with a lukewarm smile.

“Oh, but Madam doesn’t seem the type to like being restrained, does she?” Angelica asked, since the magnanimous duchess seemed like she would hate being restricted by someone else’s worry.

“She doesn’t really notice.”

“Or mind.”

“She just ignores it.”

The three maids answered, trying their best not to laugh.

The Bombshell Trio, on the other hand, did not. “Pfft!” They burst out laughing, shoulders shaking.

“He gets treated the same way at home!”

The knights found it hilarious that the duke and duchess acted the same both privately and publicly. Learning that she wasn’t just some lazy wife made them love Viola even more.

And so, having found kindred spirits, the Bombshell Trio and the maids kept chatting with each other about how much they adored Viola.

Then, while they were all excitedly discussing her good points, the duchess herself appeared.

“Kyaaaa~! What are all of you talking about!?” she cried, flustered and bright red as she tried to stop them. After finishing her conversation with the jeweler, she’d brought the necklaces—only to find the group talking about her. She was in such a panic, she completely skipped the greetings.

Cercis looked pleased with himself as he observed Viola getting adorably flustered, so he was fine. But the maids saw Rohtas standing behind them with a serious look and ducked their heads, hurrying back to their stations by the wall.

But the Bombshell Trio laughed indifferently, saying, “We had a nice little chat about you!”

“Ah, geez~ That’s embarrassing! What were you talking about!?”

“Lots of things~”

“We’ve fallen for you again, Madam!”

“You’re the best! It’s a waste letting the Vice-Captain have you!”

“What are you talking about? I don’t understand!”

Viola blushed even harder, hiding behind Cercis. Seeing that, the Bombshell Trio and the maids (and of course Cercis himself) only

thought that made her even cuter.

◆◆◆Extra — A Chat with the Hunted◆◆◆

After being safely set free from their mission, the male knights had a consolation party for themselves in a local pub.

“The ladies’ ‘requests’ aren’t ‘requests’ at all.”

“They’re ‘coercion.’”

“They talk like they’re sticking hearts and stars on the ends of their sentences, but the smile never reaches their eyes.”

“They looked deadly serious.” They thought of the Bombshell Trio’s expressions back when they’d explained the mission.

“*We’ll leave the Pommier stakeout to you♡ (Just try to fail. You won’t make it out alive.)*” they’d said, bright smiles on their beautiful faces, but unfortunately, their eyes... They were gleaming like sharpened blades.

All the gathered (hunted?) men could do was huddle together, nodding frantically under the ladies’ intensity. Just remembering it drained the blood from their faces.

“You can’t just slam hearts and stars on your words and think that makes everything...”

“Back then, I know I heard all the things they left unsaid.”

“That was just your imagination! You’re just exhausted! Forget all about it!”

“Y-yeah, you’re right! Hahaha!” Lantana laughed dryly before chugging his mug of beer.

“But no one can refuse them. You’d be a hero if you could.”

“I know.”

“I value my life.”

“Me too.”

“I’d rather just agree to their ‘requests’ than endure the hellish hazing you’d get for refusing.”

“Right!?”

Their dry laughs echoed into the night as the men all drank themselves silly.





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by Tsuredurebana

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